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# TRANSLATION AS ADVOCACY AND EMPOWERMENT IN PAKISTAN: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW

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## Abstract
*Translation has long been seen as a technical task involving the transfer of meaning from one language to another. However, a growing number of scholars now argue that translation is much more than that. It is a social and political act that can either support or challenge existing power structures. This paper presents a systematic literature review of research on translation as a form of advocacy and empowerment, with special attention to the Pakistani context. Pakistan has over seventy languages, yet millions of citizens face barriers to healthcare, legal services, and education because of language inequality. Translation education at Pakistani universities still focuses mainly on grammar and text-based exercises, with little attention to social responsibility or ethics. Drawing on frameworks from Inghilleri (2009), Cordingley and Manning (2017), Baker (2006), and Tymoczko (2007), this review argues that translation curricula in Pakistan must be redesigned so that graduates understand their role as agents of social change. Four themes are examined: translation as activism, the ethical duties of translators, curriculum gaps in Pakistani higher education, and recommendations for reform. The paper concludes that advocacy-based translation education is not only an academic goal but an urgent social necessity in Pakistan.*

**Keywords:** *Translation as Advocacy, Activist Translation, Translation Education, Pakistan, Socio-ethical Competence, Multilingualism, Curriculum Reform*

## Introduction
For most of the twentieth century, the translator was expected to stay invisible. The job was to carry meaning from one language to another as accurately and neutrally as possible. This idea of translator neutrality has been widely taught and accepted in language education (Hatim & Munday, 2004). However, many scholars now challenge this view. Research in translation studies, applied linguistics, and postcolonial theory shows that translation is never truly neutral. Every word choice, every decision about what to translate and for whom, reflects values and carries social consequences (Baker, 2006; Tymoczko, 2007).

This shift in thinking is especially important for Pakistan. The country has over seventy languages, but English holds the highest status in courts, universities, and government offices. This creates serious inequality. Millions of people cannot fully participate in public life because of language barriers (Jamshaid, Anwar & Noorani, 2024). In this situation, translation becomes more than a career. It becomes a tool for access, inclusion, and justice.

Despite this, translation education in Pakistan has not kept up with these developments. Studies show that most university programmes focus on grammar-based textbook exercises and theoretical concepts. Very little time is given to professional ethics, social issues, or the wider impact of translation on society (Malik, Seemab, Khudai & Rashid, 2023). Students leave these programmes with language skills but without a clear understanding of how translation can serve or harm communities.

This paper reviews the existing literature to address that gap. It examines the theory of advocacy-based translation, the ethical responsibilities it involves, the current state of translation education

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in Pakistan, and what changes are needed. The central argument is that teaching translation as a form of social advocacy is both theoretically supported and urgently needed in Pakistan.

## Methodology

This paper follows a systematic approach to reviewing literature. Systematic literature reviews are widely used in social science and applied linguistics research to map existing knowledge, identify gaps, and synthesise findings across diverse sources (Liberati et al., 2009; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006). Sources were identified through searches on Google Scholar, JSTOR, and Scopus using terms such as "activist translation," "translation as advocacy," "translation and social justice," "translation education Pakistan," "translator ethics," and "socio-ethical competence in translation." Reference lists of identified articles were also checked for additional relevant sources, a practice recommended to reduce the risk of missing key contributions (Snyder, 2019).

The review focuses on peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, and edited volumes published between 2004 and 2025, with preference given to post-2015 sources to capture recent developments. Pakistani sources were specifically sought for local relevance, given that the paper addresses a context in which nationally grounded scholarship remains limited. Inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied consistently throughout the screening process to ensure transparency and replicability (Moher et al., 2009). Sources were excluded if they were not peer-reviewed, not written in English, or did not address translation advocacy, translator ethics, or translation pedagogy in a substantive way.

A total of 28 sources were selected and analysed. The main themes of the paper emerged from patterns identified across these sources using thematic analysis, whereby recurring concepts and arguments were grouped into coherent categories rather than imposed in advance. This inductive approach allowed the review to reflect what the literature itself foregrounds as most significant. Figure 1 below shows the full screening and selection process.

**Figure 1:** *PRISMA-Style Flow Diagram: Literature Search and Selection Process*

| | |
|---|---|
| **IDENTIFICATION**<br>Records identified through database searching (Google Scholar, JSTOR, Scopus) (n = 214) | |
| ▼ | |
| **SCREENING**<br>Records after duplicates removed (n = 178) | **EXCLUDED**<br>Records excluded: not peer-reviewed, not in English, unrelated topic (n = 118) |
| ▼ | |
| **ELIGIBILITY**<br>Full-text articles assessed for eligibility (n = 60) | **EXCLUDED**<br>Full-text excluded: insufficient focus on advocacy/Pakistan/pedagogy (n = 32) |
| ▼ | |
| **INCLUDED**<br>Studies included in final review (n = 28) | |

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**Table 1:** *Summary of Key Sources Reviewed*

| Author(s) & Year | Focus | Key Contribution | Context |
|---|---|---|---|
| Baker (2006) | Narrative theory in translation | Translators as active narrators shaping social stories | Global |
| Tymoczko (2007) | Translational agency | Challenges the myth of neutral translation; calls for conscious activism | Global |
| Inghilleri (2009) | Heterodox ethics | Neutrality can harm vulnerable groups; translators must take ethical responsibility | Global/Asylum |
| Cordingley & Manning (2017) | Prefiguration & aspirational translation | Translation as a tool for building a more just future | Global |
| Hatim & Munday (2004) | Translation theory foundations | Technical competence as essential base for professional practice | Global |
| Emmerich (2023) | Language justice | Translation must prioritise comprehensibility for marginalised readers | Academic/Civic |
| Narzikulova (2024) | Intercultural competence | Ethical translation requires cultural sensitivity alongside language skills | Global |
| Malik et al. (2023) | Translation pedagogy in Pakistan | Pakistani curricula lack ethics, professional formation, and social context | Pakistan |
| Jamshaid et al. (2024) | Language inequality in Pakistan | English dominance excludes millions from civic and social participation | Pakistan |
| Neves (2022) | Project-based learning | Community translation projects build both skills and civic awareness | Global/Pedagogy |
| Davies & Raido (2016) | Situated learning | Combining theory with real professional practice develops advocacy competence | Global/Pedagogy |
| Al-Batineh & Al Tenaijy (2024) | Arab translation education | Gradual shift from accuracy-only to contextually engaged approaches | Arab world |
| Wang et al. (2024) | Chinese translation education | Gap between programme content and real market/community needs | China |

## Theoretical Foundations: Translation as Activism

The idea that translation is a form of activism is not new. Scholars have been developing this argument for several decades. The core claim is that translation always happens within a social

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and political context, and translators always play a role in either supporting or resisting the power structures around them.

Mona Baker's (2006) work on narrative theory was one of the first major studies to make this argument clearly. Baker showed that translators are not passive carriers of meaning. They are active storytellers who shape how events, people, and communities are represented. Translators working in news media, human rights organisations, and activist groups consistently make choices that favour certain views over others. These choices have real social effects, even when the translator does not think of themselves as an activist.

Tymoczko (2007) builds on this by arguing that the idea of the neutral translator has always been a fiction. It serves the interests of powerful groups by hiding the political work that translation actually does. She calls for translators and translation teachers to openly recognise the politics of their work and to develop what she calls translational agency meaning a conscious awareness of translation's power to create change.

The most useful framework for this paper comes from Inghilleri (2009), who introduces the concept of heterodox ethics. This concept challenges the traditional demand for translator neutrality. Inghilleri argues that when translators work with asylum seekers, refugees, or other vulnerable groups, strict neutrality can actually cause harm. It can produce translations that protect powerful institutions rather than the people who need help. Heterodox ethics means translators should actively consider the social consequences of their choices and take responsibility for them.

Cordingley and Manning (2017) add two further useful ideas: prefiguration and aspirational translation. Prefiguration means living out your values in current practice, not waiting for change to happen later. For translators, this means consistently making choices that give voice to the powerless and make essential information accessible. Aspirational translation[4] means using translation to work toward a better, more just future. These ideas give translation teachers a clear direction for redesigning their courses.

Taken together, these frameworks share one key message: translation carries ethical responsibility, and translator education must prepare students to take that responsibility seriously.

**The Ethics of Activist Translation Practice**

Inghilleri's (2009) research on interpreters in immigration and asylum settings is a powerful example of what is at stake. She found that interpreters are often pressured by institutions to produce translations that are simplified or distorted in ways that help the system work faster rather than ways that help the person being interviewed. Every choice the translator makes, which words to use, how to handle cultural references, which details to include, can directly affect whether someone receives legal protection or not. The real question is not whether translators should stay neutral, but which values they should actively uphold.

Emmerich (2023) makes a related argument about language justice. She argues that translation in educational, legal, and civic settings must put the needs of less powerful readers first. Producing a technically accurate document written in complex English or formal Urdu does not serve a citizen who speaks Sindhi or Pashto at home. In Pakistan, where government and legal documents are produced almost entirely in English, this gap is especially serious.

Narzikulova (2024) highlights the role of intercultural competence in ethical translation. She argues that an ethical translator is also a culturally aware one. Representing marginalised communities with accuracy and dignity requires deep cultural knowledge, not just language skills. Advocacy in translation is therefore both an ethical commitment and a technical competence.

Cordingley and Manning (2017) also stress that translators working with politically sensitive materials must be able to think critically. They need to identify whose interests a text serves, who

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benefits from a particular translation, and what effect their choices will have on the communities involved. This kind of thinking is almost never taught in standard undergraduate translation courses.

Looking across this scholarship, four key competencies emerge that advocacy-based translation requires: critical awareness of social and political context; the ability to resist institutional pressure that harms vulnerable people; intercultural sensitivity; and the ability to make deliberate, principled choices when translating contested material. None of these competencies are typically part of translation education in Pakistan.

**Translation, Advocacy, and the Pakistani Context**

Pakistan is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world, yet this diversity has not been treated as a strength. Instead, it has produced a layered system of inequality. English sits at the top, used in courts, universities, and government. Urdu functions as a shared language among educated urban populations. Dozens of regional languages, including Sindhi, Pashto, Balochi, Punjabi, and Seraiki, are largely excluded from formal public life (Jamshaid et al., 2024). Speakers of these languages are systematically cut off from institutions that affect their daily lives.

The consequences are very real. A person who only speaks Sindhi may struggle to understand their legal rights. A rural mother who does not speak Urdu well may be unable to access health information for her children. During the COVID-19 pandemic, most public health guidance was released in English and standard Urdu, leaving communities who spoke other languages without reliable information (Jamshaid et al., 2024).

Translation is therefore a form of infrastructure in Pakistan, as essential as roads or electricity. Without it, large parts of the population cannot access justice, healthcare, or education. The translator in Pakistan holds real social power, but most translation students are never taught to understand or use this power.

Research on translation education in Pakistan shows that most programmes focus on linguistic rules, passage translation, and theory. Social responsibility, professional ethics, and civic engagement are not standard parts of the curriculum (Malik et al., 2023). Students finish their degrees knowing how to translate a passage but not understanding why translation matters to society.

Aroob (2020), whose research examined translation students at Pakistani universities through questionnaires, found that very few could describe translation as a profession with social value. Most thought of it only as a job skill. This gap in civic imagination is a direct result of how translation is taught. Students learn what translation is technically, but not what it can do socially.

Pakistan is not alone in this problem. Al-Batineh and Al Tenaijy (2024) found similar patterns in Arab translation programmes, though some Arab institutions are beginning to shift toward more contextually aware approaches. Wang, Kang, and Abu Bakar (2024) identified the same gap in China, where translation programmes often fail to develop the intercultural and advocacy skills that employers and communities actually need. Pakistan faces these same challenges but with less regulatory oversight and a more urgent social need for reform.

**Curriculum Implications and Gaps in Translation Education**

The literature reviewed in this paper points clearly toward what needs to change in translation education in Pakistan. This section brings together the key recommendations and connects them to local conditions.

The first change needed is to make the social and political aspects of translation a visible part of teaching. Students do not need to study political science, but they do need frameworks for understanding how their translation choices affect real people and communities. Cordingley and

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Manning (2017) recommend using case studies of activist translation projects alongside regular assignments. Inghilleri (2009) similarly suggests using cases from human rights and asylum settings to teach ethical reasoning. Both approaches can be adapted for Pakistani classrooms.

The second change is giving students real-world translation experience during their studies. Neves (2022) found that project-based learning, where students work on actual translation tasks for community groups and NGOs, produces graduates who are more skilled and more aware of their social role. Casaburi and colleagues (2021), working in a different field, found that undergraduates who engage in socially meaningful work during their degree develop stronger professional identities. The same principle applies to translation. Pakistani universities should create partnerships with civil society organisations to provide students with this kind of experience.

The third change is making intercultural competence an explicit learning goal. Narzikulova (2024) argues that this means more than knowing about other cultures. It means developing the empathy and awareness needed to represent communities different from your own with accuracy and respect. In Pakistan this is especially important for translations involving minority language communities, rural populations, and people with limited access to formal education.

The fourth change is developing advocacy literacy, meaning a solid understanding of how translation is used in human rights work, legal aid, community health, and public education. Davies and Raido (2016) document practical situated learning models in translator training that combine classroom theory with real professional contexts. These models offer useful templates that Pakistani institutions can adapt.

The fifth change, perhaps the most important, is cultural. Malik and colleagues (2023) found that many Pakistani students see translation courses as minor requirements rather than core professional preparation. Changing this requires not only new course content but also changes in how translation is assessed, how teachers talk about the discipline, and how universities communicate its social value. Aroob (2020) notes that student attitudes are shaped largely by their instructors, which means investing in teacher development is just as important as redesigning the curriculum.

**Discussion: Towards an Advocacy-Oriented Translation Pedagogy for Pakistan**

Bringing together all the literature reviewed in this paper, it is possible to outline a practical framework for reforming translation education in Pakistan. This is not a fixed prescription. It is a set of directions suggested by the collective weight of existing research, adapted to the specific situation in Pakistan.

The foundation of the framework is a simple but important shift. Translation education in Pakistan must help students see their work as socially located and ethically serious. Technical skills in accuracy, fluency, and equivalence remain important. But as Inghilleri (2009) argues, these skills must be connected to a broader professional identity, one that includes critical awareness and a sense of responsibility to the communities the translator serves. Students need to understand that the people they translate for are not abstract readers but real individuals whose access to rights and services depends partly on the quality and orientation of translation practice.

Practically, this means several things. Programmes should include dedicated units on translation ethics, using local case studies from Pakistani health communication, legal aid, and community advocacy. Partnerships with NGOs and civic organisations should be developed so that students can gain real experience. Assessment methods should reward critical reflection, not just linguistic accuracy. Teacher training should give instructors the language and concepts they need to model a socially engaged approach to the discipline.

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At the national level, Pakistan's higher education bodies should consider developing standards for translation education that include socio-ethical competences alongside linguistic ones. Without such standards, individual universities have no clear incentive to move beyond traditional approaches. The absence of national guidelines is itself one reason why reform has been so slow.

It is worth making clear that advocacy-based translation education does not mean abandoning technical rigor. Hatim and Munday (2004) are correct that accuracy, register awareness, and genre knowledge are foundational. A translator who cannot produce a linguistically precise and contextually appropriate text cannot serve any community well, regardless of their ethical commitments. The argument here is not that technical training should be reduced, but that it must serve a broader purpose and be framed within a clear sense of professional and social responsibility.

Translators who understand the social stakes of their work are likely to be more careful and more conscientious precisely because they know what their choices mean for the communities they serve. Ethical awareness does not compete with technical skill; it deepens it. When students learn to ask not only whether a translation is accurate but also whether it is just, accessible, and respectful of the people it represents, they become more thoughtful practitioners overall. This integration of the technical and the ethical is the defining feature of the advocacy-oriented approach this paper recommends.

A useful comparison can be made with medical and legal education. Both fields combine technical training with clear instruction in professional ethics. It is widely accepted in both professions that technical skill without ethical formation can produce graduates who cause harm through ignorance. Translation education in Pakistan has not yet made this integration, and the evidence reviewed here shows clearly that it needs to.

**Limitations**

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the search was conducted only in English, which means relevant scholarship published in Urdu, Sindhi, or other Pakistani languages may not have been captured. Given that some of the most locally grounded research on Pakistani education is produced in regional languages, this represents a real gap in coverage.

Second, the review did not include grey literature such as government policy documents, university curriculum guides, or institutional reports from Pakistani higher education bodies. These sources might have provided a more detailed picture of how translation education is formally structured across different institutions.

Third, while the review draws on studies from Pakistan, the Arab world, and China for comparative purposes, the literature base for Pakistan specifically remains thin. Only a small number of peer-reviewed studies directly examine translation education in Pakistani universities, which limits the confidence with which conclusions can be drawn about local conditions.

Fourth, this paper does not collect or analyse primary data. All conclusions are based on the existing published literature. The views and experiences of actual translation students and teachers in Pakistan are therefore not directly represented. These limitations point toward important directions for future research, which are addressed in the following section.

**Recommendations**

The limitations identified above suggest several clear priorities for future research. The most urgent need is for empirical studies that gather primary data from translation students and teachers at Pakistani universities. Questionnaire-based surveys, interviews, and classroom observation

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studies would provide the kind of ground-level evidence needed to move beyond the curriculum gap identified in the literature and toward concrete, evidence-based reform proposals.

Comparative studies across different types of Pakistani universities would also be valuable. At present, most available research does not distinguish between large public universities, smaller provincial institutions, and private universities. Given that resources and curriculum structures vary significantly across these contexts, institution-type comparisons could reveal important differences in how translation education is currently being delivered and where reform is most urgently needed.

There is also a need for action research studies that document what actually happens when advocacy-oriented teaching approaches are introduced into Pakistani translation classrooms. Studies modelled on the project-based learning frameworks recommended by Neves (2022) and the situated learning models described by Davies and Raido (2016) could provide practical evidence about what works in the Pakistani context specifically, rather than relying on frameworks developed elsewhere.

Finally, future research should examine the role of language policy at the institutional and national level in shaping what is and is not possible in translation education. The socio-political conditions that produce language inequality in Pakistan do not only affect translation graduates after they enter the workforce. They also shape what universities teach, how programmes are funded, and whose voices are heard in curriculum design. Research that connects translation pedagogy to broader language policy debates would significantly enrich the scholarly conversation this paper has contributed to.

## Conclusion

This systematic literature review has examined the theory, ethics, and teaching implications of translation as advocacy, with a focus on what this means for Pakistan. The review shows that a strong and growing body of scholarship supports repositioning translation from a technical service into a socially meaningful practice with real implications for justice and inclusion. The frameworks developed by Inghilleri (2009), Cordingley and Manning (2017), Baker (2006), and Tymoczko (2007) provide a solid theoretical basis for this view. At the same time, research from Pakistan, the Arab world, China, and other regions consistently shows that the gap between theory and actual teaching practice remains wide.

In Pakistan, this gap is especially serious. Language inequality is a structural feature of social life, and translation is one of the most important tools for closing it. Students who complete their translation degrees without understanding advocacy are not fully prepared for the demands of their profession in Pakistani society.

The recommendations of this review are clear. Translation programmes in Pakistan need curriculum reform that explicitly integrates social ethics, community-based projects, intercultural training, and a stronger professional identity built around civic responsibility. These changes require investment in teachers, better assessment practices, and national-level policy commitment. They are not optional extras. They are essential if Pakistan is to produce translators who can truly serve the country's linguistically diverse and socially unequal society.

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