



Investigating Dictionary Use by Sudanese EFL University Students

Ahmad Muhammad Atiya
Karary University - College Of Languages

Abstract:

This study aimed at investigating the dictionary use by Sudanese EFL university students. An analytic, descriptive research design was used. A questionnaire was used to collect the quantitative data. The findings of the study indicated that the majority of the students consulted the dictionary to get the meaning in Arabic, get spelling, get pronunciation or get the part of speech of a word. The findings also indicated that the vast majority of the students preferred to use the electronic dictionary more than the traditional dictionary, and bilingual dictionary more than monolingual one.

Keywords: *dictionary, electronic, bilingual, monolingual, EFL students, quantitative data.*

المستخلص :

هدفت هذه الدراسة الى استقصاء استخدام القاموس بواسطة الطلاب الجامعيين السودانيين الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية . فقد استخدم منهج البحث التحليلي - الوصفي. حيث استخدمت استبانة لجمع البيانات الكمية. و قد أشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن معظم الطلاب قد استخدموا القاموس للحصول على المعنى باللغة العربية، و الإملاء ، و النطق ، و أجزاء الكلام المتعلقة بالكلمة. و قد أشارت النتائج أيضا إلى أن الغالبية العظمى من الطلاب قد فضلوا استخدام القاموس الإلكتروني أكثر من القاموس التقليدي ، و القاموس ثنائي اللغة أكثر من القاموس أحادي اللغة.

كلمات مفتاحية : *قاموس، إلكتروني، ثنائي اللغة، أحادي اللغة، الطلاب الذين يدرسون اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية، معلومات كمية.*

Overview

Dictionaries are considered indispensable tool especially in the field of vocabulary learning. Dictionaries help language learners in the way they produce and comprehend language (Nation, 2000). They also support learners with useful information on the field of linguistic as well as cultural aspects of words (Nation, 2002). However, it seems that L2 learners do not use dictionary effectively as intended by their compilers (Arishi, 2004; Bejoint, 1989; Hartman, 2009). Furthermore, technology advancement has brought a positive impact on dictionary compilation and consultation. Consequently, the skill of searching words alphabetically has disappeared and replaced by searching a word by voice recording. So, electronic dictionaries have remarkably become

distinct in the field of lexicography due to their encompassing of some non-linguistic features such as fastness, easiness and light weight.

Thus, in the Sudanese university context, the researchers have observed that most of the students ignore dictionary skills. Therefore, in the current study, the researcher aims at investigating the use of dictionary by the Sudanese university EFL learners. The study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1- What is the commonest type of dictionary that is used by Sudanese university students?
- 2- What is the commonest lexical information that the Sudanese university EFL students tend to consult the dictionary about?



Hypotheses

1- The electronic dictionary is expected to be the most preferred one used by Sudanese university EFL students.

2- Getting the meaning in Arabic, getting pronunciation and spelling are expected to be

• Type of Dictionaries

Dictionaries have been classified into various categories based on multiple criteria. For instance, they can be classified in terms of the target audience, language and medium (paper/electronic). Audience could be categorized into two types: the native speakers and the learners (non-native speakers). It is worth mentioning that the target audience plays a primary role in dictionary compiling (deciding word choice, entries and examples). For instance, the dictionary that compiled for the native speakers is always characterized by being free from grammatical information, usages, or pragmatics. The learners' dictionary, on the other hand, tends to include additional features such as collocations, drawings, illustrations, lists and glossaries of irregular verbs, plural nouns and nationalities (Al-Homoud, 2017).

Dictionaries can also be classified in terms of the number of languages they address. So, if only L2 is addressed, the dictionary is described as monolingual dictionary. The monolingual dictionary contains only L2 and requires a high proficiency in the L2 (Nation, 2001). Therefore, learners prefer the bilingual dictionary to monolingual one (Nation, 2001). If more than one language included, it is known as bilingual dictionary. If the headword and its examples are in L2 and the meaning is given in the L1, the dictionary is known as bilingualized (Nation, 2001).

Furthermore, dictionaries can be classified based on the medium: paper or electronic. Paper dictionaries refer to all conventional dictionaries

commonest type of information that the Sudanese EFL students tend to consult the dictionary about.

Literature Review

that are printed on paper. Schmitt and McCarthy (1997: 3) suggest paper dictionaries require more efforts than electronic ones. This extra effort allows the student to improve reading skills such as skimming and scanning. However, despite this advantage, paper dictionaries seem boring because the user needs to flip pages to get the desired information. Electronic, on the other hand, dictionaries are found in various forms: CD ROM, portable dictionaries (on cell phones) and online dictionaries. Recent dictionary studies (Chi, 2003; Li, 1998; Li, 2003) found that the hand-held electronic dictionary and online dictionaries are gaining acceptance among students. This preference is due to fast and convenient online access to electronic dictionaries plus the extra features they provide such as 'real sound' word pronunciation (Kent, 2001). According to Nesi (1999b), electronic dictionaries can be stored on a hard disk or a CD ROM to be used with a computer. This merit makes it more portable than a dictionary-sized book and makes it able to supply many times the quantity of information (Nesi, 1999b, p. 56).

• Reasons for Consulting a Dictionary

Research has shown that language learners have different reasons for consulting dictionaries. According to Harvey and Yuill (1997), learners utilized dictionaries to get some information such as confirming spelling, meaning or collocation. Additionally, Alhaisoni (2008) revealed that learners consult dictionaries due to Lack of word's knowledge, guessing and referring to dictionary to confirm, retrieve partial knowledge of word but not including the



meaning, and retrieve other meaning of word. Nation (2001) revealed that learners used a dictionary to check on spelling, to confirm the meaning, to find synonyms, or to find the suitable word collocation. Béjoint (1981) found that the students commonly used the dictionary to get the meaning of new difficult words, and they rarely used a dictionary to get word's etymology or word's level of formality. In his empirical study, Diab (1990) found that monolingual and bilingual dictionaries were reported not to be used by the students at schools. Al-Ajmi (1992) found that the Kuwait students referred to bilingual dictionary more frequently than other types of dictionaries. He

Methodology

• Participants

The participants of the current study were 75 students majoring English language at various

also found that monolingual dictionaries were less popular among the students.

The aforementioned literature has addressed the reasons for using a dictionary. It has also addressed the types of a dictionary. All the literature has arrived at reasonable findings. However, a distinction should be made between the types of information for consulting a dictionary and the reasons for using it. For instance, if the learner has come across a difficult word and wants to get it meaning, this will be a reason for consulting a dictionary whereas the meaning of the word provided by a dictionary will be information.

Sudanese universities including males and females. Their ages ranged between 18 and 22. The participants are shown in the table below:

University	No. of Students	College
Khartoum	15	Arts
Sudan University of Science and Technology	11	Languages
Al-Neelain University	16	Arts
Al-Mughtaribeen University	13	Languages
Sinnar University	20	Education

• Instrument

To get the qualitative data, a 9-item questionnaire was designed in accordance with the Likert five-scale questionnaire. The questionnaire addresses the main lexical information that is needed by the students: finding the meaning, checking spelling, checking pronunciation, getting part of speech, getting word derivation, checking synonyms and antonyms, getting stress and syllables, getting formal language and word's etymology.

After being validated by a university professor, the internal reliability of the questionnaire items was calculated via Cronbach alpha (statistical measurement). It was 83.9.

• Procedures of Data Collection

After the questionnaire reliability and validity have been achieved, the questionnaire was distributed to students at the universities mentioned earlier. The researcher got assistance from several friends who have actually been



working at these universities. Then the scripts were coded and statistically analyzed.

Results of the Questionnaire Analysis

Table 1: The participants' reported use of dictionary

Statement	Responses	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
I use my dictionary to find the meaning in Arabic.	Percentage	50%	7%	41%	1%	1%
	Numbers	36	6	30	1	1
I use my dictionary to know the spelling of the word.	Percentage	44%	13%	23%	17%	3%
	Numbers	32	10	16	14	2
I use my dictionary to know the pronunciation of the word.	Percentage	14%	25%	24%	25%	12%
	Numbers	11	18	17	18	9
I use my dictionary to get the part of speech of a word.	Percentage	11%	24%	17%	33%	15%
	Numbers	8	20	13	24	11
I use my dictionary to get the word's stress and syllables.	Percentage	7%	28%	31%	19%	7%
	Numbers	6	21	23	17	5
I use my dictionary to find out the derivation of a word.	Percentage	9%	22%	20%	28%	21%
	Numbers	7	16	15	22	16
I use my dictionary to find if a word is formal or informal	Percentage	0%	3%	1%	48.60%	47.40%
	Numbers	0	2	1	36	35
I use my dictionary to know the word's etymology	Percentage	0%	5.20%	0%	47.40%	47.40%
	Numbers	0	4	0	35	35
I use my dictionary to know the synonyms and antonyms of the word.	Percentage	0%	21%	2%	44%	47.40%
	Numbers	0	3	2	33	35

The table above shows that *"finding meaning in Arabic"* is the main purpose for the majority of the participants to refer to the dictionary. 66 students out of 75 have reported that they always and sometimes refer to the dictionary to obtain the meaning of the word in Arabic. This might indicate that students mainly use their dictionaries for finding the meaning in Arabic. Spelling is ranked second in order of frequency of use among lexical information checked by the students. 67% of the students have chosen to refer always and sometimes to their dictionary for spelling purposes. Pronunciation is the third kind of lexical information that these Sudanese

students checked in their dictionaries. 14% and 24% of the students have chosen to always and sometimes check their dictionary for pronunciation. This means that pronunciation information tended to be consulted less frequently by the students. Parts of speech are reported to be checked frequently by the students. 47% of the participants reported referring to the dictionary in order to check parts of speech, sometimes, often or always. The statement *"I use a dictionary to find out the stress placement and the number of syllables of a word"* is ranked fifth among types of lexical information that are sought by participants. 29%

have stated that they always or sometimes refer to their dictionary to obtain this type of information. Finding out the derivation of a word has come in the sixth position. 25% of the students reported that they always or sometimes use the dictionary for the words derivations.

Using a dictionary to find out the level of formality of a word has been ranked seventh among the nine lexical information types included in the questionnaire. 96% of the students stated that they either rarely or never to

check their dictionary for formal and informal vocabulary. The use of a dictionary to find out the word's etymology has been ranked eighth among types of lexical information consulted by the students. 70 students stated that they rarely/never refer to their dictionary to check verb tense. Searching for synonyms and antonyms was reported to be used infrequently. Only 5 students have claimed to check this information.

Figure 1: Type of dictionary used based on medium in paper.

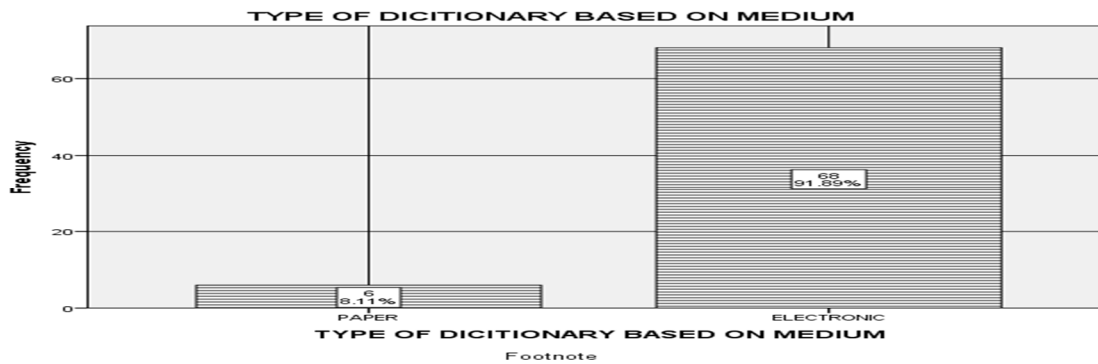


Figure 1 shows that 88 students with a percentage of 91.89 prefer to consult the electronic dictionary. This result could be attributed to the availability, accessibility and portability of electronic dictionary mainly on smartphones.

Figure 2: Type of dictionary used by students based on the language included.

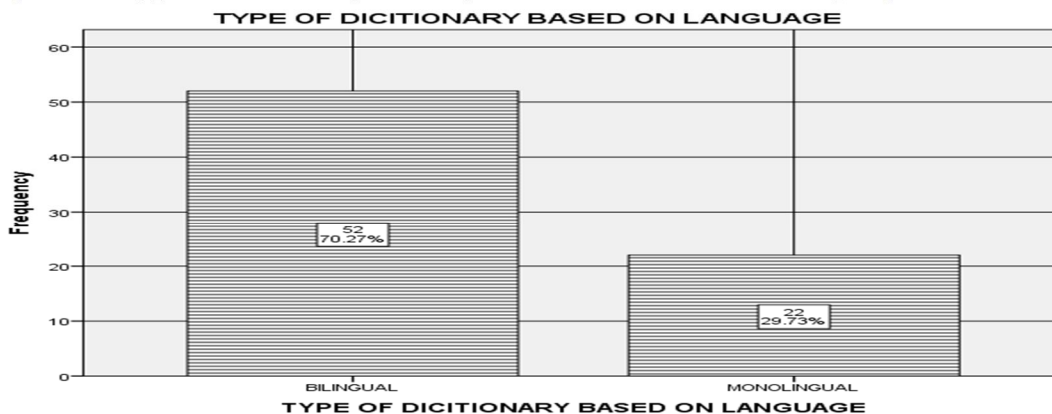


Figure 2 shows that 52 students out of 74 prefer to consult the bilingual dictionary. This result might indicate the students' lack of proficiency in the L1.



Discussion and Verification of the Study Hypotheses

The current study aims at investigating the dictionary use by the Sudanese university students. Two hypotheses have been suggested:

1- Getting the meaning in Arabic, getting pronunciation and spelling are expected to be commonest type of information that the Sudanese EFL students tend to consult the dictionary about

2- The electronic dictionary is expected to be the most preferred one used by Sudanese university EFL students.

To verify these two hypotheses, a 9 –item questionnaire was administered to 74 students majoring English at various university in the Sudan.

The questionnaire results indicate that the meaning in Arabic is the major purpose of the Sudanese university students for consulting the dictionary. This result indicates that the students are much interested in getting the meaning in their mother tongue language which signals their lack of proficiency in L1. This result is in line with findings of (Tomaszczyk, 1979; Béjoint, 1981; Battenburg, 1991; Alqahtani, 2005). The analysis also indicates the students consult the dictionary to check spelling. This result might be justified by the fact that most of the students are more interested the spelling of the word than other word's features such as stress, number of syllables and so on. This result is congruent with the findings of Tomaszczyk (1979) and Alqahtani (2005). In the same context, Greenbaum et al. (1984) found that her US students rank spelling as the most common reason for their own resorting to a dictionary. The results of the questionnaire have also revealed that the students did not frequently consult the dictionary for pronunciation. This finding might be justified to their heavy reliance

on their teachers' pronunciation or they or their inability to know pronunciations symbols. This result is congruent with the findings of Béjoint (1981), Kharma (1985), Iqbal (1987), Diab (1990), Al-Jarf (1999) who found that their participants were infrequently consulted their dicitonaries to retrieve pronunciation.

Furthermore, the results of the questionnaire have also revealed the students' frequent consultation to get the part of speech. This could be attributed to their adequate knowledge of parts of speech. The same result is reached by Diab (1989), Battenburg (1990) and El-Badry (1990). The result of the questionnaire has also indicated that the majority of the students consult the dictionary to know the number of the syllables of a word or the stress placement. The same result is reached by Huang (2003) found that the Thais students did the same. Additionally, consulting dictionaries to get the word's derivation is common among the Sudanese university students. This result seems to contradict with the result of Battenburg (1991). The result of the questionnaire has indicated that the students are not interested in the knowing formal language. The same procedure applies to consulting the dictionary for getting the word etymology or synonyms and antonyms. This result indicates the students' lack of interest in vocabulary learning. The literature has similarly shown that Kipfer (1985) and Harvey and Yuill (1997) found that synonyms ranked lowest with users' percentage rating below 10%.

Concerning the most preferable type of dictionary to students in terms of language included and medium on paper, the results of the questionnaire have also indicated that the vast majority of the students prefer to use electronic dictionary more than paper one. This finding could be attributed to the huge explosion of



information technology which the world is witnessing. The findings have also revealed that the students prefer to use bilingual dictionary more than monolingual one. A possible justification for this result might consulting bilingual dictionary provides the students with more insight into the learning of L1 compared to monolingual one.

Findings and Conclusion

The current study is an investigation into the dictionary use by the Sudanese EFL university students. The key findings are that getting the meaning in Arabic, checking spelling, getting the parts of speech and checking pronunciation are considered the major purpose for the Sudanese university students when consulting the dictionary. The findings have also indicated that the students have disregarded extra lexical features such as the word's stress and syllables, etymology and synonyms and antonyms. It has also been revealed that the students prefer to consult electronic and bilingual dictionaries more than paper or monolingual ones. The findings have also revealed that Thus, it is essential to teach dictionary skills to university students plus enlightening the students of the importance of dictionary.

References

1. Ahmad, A. (2014) Towards Mobile learning Deployment in Higher Education in Brunel University London. Published Ph.D. Thesis.
2. Al-Saghayer (2012) *The use of English dictionary by Arab students*.
3. Al-Jarf, R. (1999). Use of electronic dictionaries in ESL classroom. TESOL Arabia'99.5th Annual Conference entitled "Teaching, learning and technology". Conference Proceedings Vol. IV.
4. Alqahtani, M. (2005), *The use of vocabulary learning strategies by EFL learners at three different educational levels*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Essex
5. Arishi, S (2004). The use of dictionary by Saudi learners of English. *Semantic, African and Applied linguistics*, 13, 99-108
6. Baharom, S.S. (2012) Designing mobile learning activities in the Malaysian Higher Education Context: A Social Constructivist Approach. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis
7. Battenburg, J. D. (1991). *English monolingual learners dictionaries: a user-oriented study* (Lexicographica Series Maior 39), Tübingen: Niemeyer.
8. Bejoint, H. (1994). *Tradition and innovation in modern English dictionaries*. Oxford:
9. Chi, A. (2003). *An empirical study of the efficacy of integrating the teaching of dictionary use into a tertiary English curriculum in Hong Kong*: Language Centre, Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.
10. Diab, T., & Hamdan, J. (1999). Interacting with words and dictionaries: The case of Jordanian EFL learners. *International Journal of Lexicography*, 12, 4, 281.
11. Hartmann, R. R. K. & G. James, (1998). *Dictionary of Lexicography*. London: Routledge.
12. Iqbal, Z. (1987). *Aspects of the learner's dictionary with special reference to advanced Pakistani learners of English*. Ph.D. thesis, University of Aston, Birmingham.
13. Kharma, N.N. (1985). Wanted: a brand-new type of learners' dictionary. *Multilingua*. 4, 85-90.
14. Kent, D. (2001). Korean university freshmen's' dictionary use and perceptions regarding dictionaries. *The Korean TESOL journal*. 4, 1
15. Kipfer, B., (1987), Dictionaries and the intermediate student: communicative needs and



the development of user reference skills, In: A.P. Cowie (ed.), *The Dictionary and the Language Learner*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, p.44-54.

16. Laufer, B., & Kimmel, M. (1997). Bilingualized dictionaries: how learners really use them. *System*, 25, 3, 361-369.

17. Maria B. Cruz (2012) Student and Teacher Perceptions of a Mobile-Based Biology Vocabulary Study Tool for English Language Learners published Ph.D. Thesis.

18. Nation, I.S.P., (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*. Cambridge University Press.

19. Nesi, H. (2000). *The use and abuse of EFL dictionaries: how learners of English as a foreign language read and interpret dictionary entries*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.

20. Tomaszczyk, J. (1979). Dictionaries users and uses. *Glottodidactica* (12), 103-119.

21. Osman, M. (2013) Evaluation of mobile and communication technologies for language learning. Unpublished Master Thesis.