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The use of dictionaries by EFL learners at the Universidad de Quintana Roo

The use of dictionaries has been widely examined around the world (Tomaszczyk, 1979; Underhill, 1985; Summers, 1988; Battenburg, 1991; Laufer and Hadar, 1997; Laufer and Kimmel, 1997; Scholfield, 1997; Cowie, 2002). Some researchers have conducted studies on the contribution of dictionaries while learners are engaged in language tasks such as reading (see e.g. Luppescu and Day, 1993; Knight, 1994), writing (see e.g. Ard, 1982), and reading comprehension tests (see e.g. Bensoussan, 1983; Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984). However, it seems that in Mexico dictionary use has not been extensively researched.

This study set out to investigate whether there were significant differences in the use of four types of learners' dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, electronic, and internet-based. Additionally, attention was paid to the look-up behaviour of a sample of 150 learners enrolled in a five-year English major. By look-up behaviour is meant all the information that learners aim to find in target language dictionaries. The main instrument used in this study was a 78-item vocabulary learning strategies questionnaire designed by the author and validated via a preliminary study carried out in the Universidad Veracruzana with English major students as well. The results showed that learners relied heavily on bilingual dictionaries, which may be a bit surprising for English majors. Monolingual dictionaries, on the other hand, were the second most frequently used type of dictionary followed by internet-based dictionaries. Interestingly, electronic dictionaries were the least used type. Regarding the look-up behaviour it was found that, in order of frequency, learners used any dictionaries to check (1) meaning(s), (2) examples and fixed expressions, (3) spelling, (4) pronunciation, and (5) part of speech. All in all, the results of this investigation may shed light on the need for training learners on the use of dictionaries, perhaps emphasising monolingual dictionary use. Besides this, other pedagogical implications will be discussed in the presentation.

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1. Introduction

This research report is part of a wider investigation mainly concerned with the use of English vocabulary learning strategies at university level. Our focus in this presentation is on the use of dictionaries by EFL learners, that is, the type of learner's dictionaries used and the look-up behaviour. The use of dictionaries has been widely examined around the world (Tomaszczyk, 1979; Underhill, 1985; Summers, 1988; Battenburg, 1991; Laufer and Hadar, 1997; Laufer and Kimmel, 1997; Scholfield, 1997; Cowie, 2002). Some researchers have conducted studies on the contribution of dictionaries while learners are engaged in language tasks such as reading (see e.g. Luppescu and Day, 1993; Knight, 1994), writing (see e.g. Ard, 1982), and reading comprehension tests (see e.g. Bensoussan, 1983; Bensoussan and Laufer, 1984). However, it seems that in Mexico dictionary use has not been extensively researched.

2. Dictionary use strategies.

It is common knowledge that L2 learners generally make use of 'vocabulary reference works' such as dictionaries for both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) purposes (Scholfield, 1997). In a pioneering study, Tomaszczyk (1979:108) suggested that dictionary use depended not only on the learners' L2 proficiency level but also on the nature of the language skill (or task) practised. He found that learners reported using dictionaries mostly for reading and writing purposes and to a lesser extent for translation, speaking and listening. In addition to the use of dictionaries when doing any four-skills tasks, L2 learners can use them as aids to learning vocabulary (Summers, 1988; Nation 2001). However, in this presentation we will only concentrate on what type of dictionaries L2 learners regularly use and how they use them mostly in reception, i.e. the strategic choice to use a dictionary (Scholfield, 1997:283).

2.1 Types of dictionaries

Foreign learners' dictionaries are broadly classified into monolingual (MD) and bilingual (BD) dictionaries. However, there is another type of dictionary that has received little attention in L2 vocabulary acquisition: the so-called bilingualised dictionary (BLD) (Laufer and Hadar, 1997; Laufer and Kimmel, 1997; Cowie, 2002). In simple terms, a bilingualised dictionary is nothing else but "a combination of a learner's monolingual dictionary (same number of entries and meanings for each entry) with a translation of the entry" (Laufer and Hadar, 1997:190). In other words, a BLD is mainly based on the contents of an existing MD (Cowie, 2002). To the best of my knowledge, BLDs are not commonly used in Mexico.

From a wider perspective, Underhill (1985) distinguishes three kinds of dictionaries: the monolingual learners' dictionary, the bilingual or translating dictionary, and the native speakers' dictionary. In his study of MDs Battenburg (1991) also makes a distinction between monolingual learner's dictionary and general monolingual dictionary; this latter is intended for native speakers. Apart from traditional paper-based dictionaries, electronic dictionaries have recently come into play in second language learning. Nesi (1998) describes three types of electronic dictionaries: hand-held dictionaries (which are very popular in South-east Asia), dictionaries on CD-ROM, and dictionaries on the internet. In short, a range of dictionary types have been made available to L2 learners; however, their effectiveness is still an issue in that there are conflicting views among language teachers and researchers. However, our interest at this point is to find out our subjects' dictionary preferences and dictionary use strategies, which might be determined by several learner factors, especially those within the personality domain.

2.2 L2 learners' preferences for dictionaries

As pointed out above, we are concerned about L2 learners' preferences for dictionaries. Tomaszczyk (1979) administered a 57-item questionnaire to 284 foreign language learners and 165 foreign language speakers to examine how they used dictionaries and their attitudes to and expectations of dictionaries. The subjects included American college students, university Polish learners, language instructors, and translators, involving sixteen different languages. The results of the survey indicated that most of the learners, regardless of their high proficiency level, continue using BDs as well as MDs. This may imply that the use of BDs is not exclusive to less proficient learners, which will be interesting to explore in our study. However, this finding should be treated with caution in that many of the respondents were translators. Tomaszczyk also suggested that there is a relationship between L2 proficiency and dictionary use – that is, “the dependence on dictionaries decreases as their command of the language increases” (p. 116). As mentioned above, the choice of dictionary type appeared to be dependent on the language task. Thus, a subsample of the learners reported using BDs more frequently than MDs when engaged in such activities as reading, writing, and of course, translation. Curiously, the same pattern of use was also reported for listening and speaking. It should be noted that in Schmitt's (1997) survey BDs were very popular among Japanese learners of English.

Another early study on dictionary use and preferences was conducted by Baxter (1980) who in fact advocated the choice of monolingual English learner's dictionary. He administered a questionnaire to 342 Japanese English majors and non-English majors enrolled in three national universities. Among other aspects, the learners were asked what type of dictionary they used most: bilingual Japanese-English, bilingual English-Japanese or monolingual.

Again, English-Japanese BDs were more frequently used than MDs and Japanese-English BDs, regardless of the major or non-major situation. Similarly, BDs were considered as the most important type of book the learners used, followed by MDs and grammar books in English and Japanese. All in all, learners' preference for a BD was apparently due to the difficulty in understanding the definitions offered by the MD. This issue was also emphasised by Amritavalli (1999) who argues that definition in EFL dictionaries should not be more difficult than the words they define.

Battenburg (1991) reported on a study he carried out as part of his doctoral dissertation. He surveyed 60 ESL learners at Ohio University to explore, among other things, their dictionary habits. Based on scores from a standard English test, he selected the learners to make three levels of L2 proficiency: elementary, intermediate, and advanced. As expected, BDs were more often used by beginning learners than intermediate and advanced learners. Regarding the use of MDs, more use of them was found among elementary learners than at the other levels, which appeared to be a surprising result. Battenburg argues that it may be the case that the learners who consult MDs do not feel that they benefit from them; then, they resort to BDs, which apparently suit them better. However, the expected trend of more advanced learners using the general monolingual English dictionary was in fact observed. It should be recalled that this type of dictionary is more or less equivalent to dictionaries intended for native speakers of the target language.

2.3 Information looked up in dictionaries (look-up behaviour).

The types of dictionaries are closely linked to the information that learners want to obtain from them as well as the purpose for using them. Hartmann (1983) describes four

interactive factors of general dictionary use: information (e.g. meanings/synonyms); operations (e.g. finding meanings/words); type of users; and purposes (e.g. decoding/encoding FL texts). Furthermore, comparisons of BDs and MDs have shown that they provide L2 learners with a variety of information about a target word. Atkins (1985), who made a comparison of both types of dictionaries, listed 13 components generally found in either BD or MD entries:

- (1) the headword, and any variant spellings;
- (2) pronunciation;
- (3) details of word classes (parts of speech) to which the headword belong;
- (4) morphology: inflection(s) which may cause difficulties;
- (5) syntax: the syntactic potential of the headword and any syntactic restrictions it may carry;
- (6) an explanation of the various senses of the headword;
- (7) exemplification of usage, including collocating words and fixed or semi-fixed phrases;
- (8) a listing of derived forms of the headword, with or without further explanation;
- (9) cross-reference(s) to related entries;
- (10) semantic (including selectional restrictions).
- (11) stylistic: indication of style and register, where relevant;
- (12) usage material for the purpose of further clarification, e.g. differentiation from near-synonyms, or warning of hidden hazards;
- (13) etymological: a diachronic view of the headword.

(From Atkins, 1985:16)

She explains that BDs and MDs do not show variation in terms of pronunciation, part of speech, inflections and cross-referential information. She also states that etymological information is rarely provided in synchronic dictionaries (see e.g. Webster's dictionary). Broadly speaking, MDs seem to provide more detailed information about the headword. However, this does not mean that MDs can be more effective than BDs. In any case, what matters for us is what type of information L2 learners look up in dictionaries, especially when they meet a new word while reading and perhaps listening.

Tomaszczyk (1979) also concentrated on the main types of information that learners regularly looked up, which obviously varied from dictionary to dictionary. The findings

reported in his study are a little difficult to summarise here due to reasons of space, however. In a nutshell, the subjects reported interest in information about established meanings of content words in the first place, followed by “information about word division and spelling; status, usage and currency of words; and receptive and productive grammar” (p.113). It should be noted that such interest was paralleled by actual information types checked in the dictionary, which may not be necessarily the case as some learners may show interest in some aspects of the word, but may not pay attention to them in actual look-ups.

Similarly, Bejoint (1981) looked into the use of MDs among 122 French university learners of English in an EFL environment. Like Tomaszczyk (1979) and Baxter (1980), Bejoint employed a 21-item questionnaire. One of the questions (No. 8) addressed the types of information the would-be teachers more frequently looked up in monolingual dictionaries. The learners were presented with eight types of information in the questionnaire. The most frequent type of information reportedly looked up was meaning, followed by syntactic information, synonyms, spelling, and pronunciation. The least frequent information type was etymology along with language variety.

In the study described above, Battenburg (1991) dealt with eleven types of information in a MD entry, which included spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, definitions, etymology, illustrative sentences, derived forms, synonyms, cross-references, usage labels, and pictures and diagrams. In addition, he compared the type of information looked up across the three L2 proficiency levels described above. All in all, looking up pronunciation information was reported less by more proficient learners. This finding seems logical because more proficient learners can apply some pronunciation rules to new words they encounter. Similarly, advanced learners reported looking up definitions and synonyms less frequently

than elementary and intermediate learners. Interestingly, elementary level students showed more look-up of derived forms than more advanced learners. However, no differences in looking up spelling were found among the three types of learners. In terms of frequency of look-up by all learners, etymology was least sought in dictionaries along with cross-references. The surprising result was that “students reported they did not use illustrative sentences more commonly” (Battenburg, 1991:97).

In sum, it seems that L2 proficiency level is a strong predictor of dictionary use (e.g. look-up behaviour). Ahmed (1988:236), who also included dictionary use in his study, observed that a group of underachieving learners indicated not using a dictionary very frequently whereas good learners at school used BDs more; good learners at university used MDs more (poor learners at university used BDs). Gu and Johnson (1996) found that skilful dictionary use positively correlated with some measures of L2 proficiency of Chinese learners of English. This means that more proficient learners appeared to be more expert in knowing what relevant information to look up in dictionaries, though this finding contradicts some of those reported by Battenburg (1991). In a follow-up study on L2 learner variables (e.g. VLS) and English achievement, Wen and Johnson (1997) noted differences in dictionary use between high and low achievers. High achievers reported during their interviews that they usually considered when to use a dictionary and what information to look up and copy down. Low achievers, on the other hand, “tended to follow a relatively inflexible set of procedures rather than a decision-making process” (p. 36). In addition to L2 proficiency and achievement, other learner factors (e.g. gender) have been considered as predictors of dictionary use. Nakamura (2000), for example, found that gender and L2 proficiency may have an interactive

effect on dictionary use: high-proficient female learners checked more information provided by dictionaries than male learners.

In sum, based on the studies briefly reviewed here we posit the following hypotheses and research questions:

RH-1 Bilingual dictionaries are more frequently used by all learners than monolingual dictionaries.

RH-2 Electronic dictionaries and internet-based dictionaries are the least frequently used vocabulary reference works.

RQ-1 What is the order of frequency with which different kinds of information are looked up in the dictionary?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 150 EFL university learners enrolled in a five-year English Language Teaching undergraduate programme at the University of Quintana Roo, Mexico (south-east region of the country). The sample comprised 47 males and 103 females, whose gender ratio is, to some extent, common in English majors all over Mexico. In addition to this fact, it is normal in this programme that the number of learners decreases across years of study. The age of the participants varied between 18 and 25 years, but most of learners were within the ordinary age of university level (between 18 and 22). All of them were native speakers of Spanish, though some are of Mayan descent.

3.2 Instruments and analyses

The main instrument administered in this study was a 78-item Vocabulary Learning Strategies Questionnaire (VLS-Q), which was the final product of the preliminary study

carried out by the researcher with a parallel group of learners from another state university. Therefore, the contents of the VLS-Q were validated by the data collected through both open questionnaires and semi-structured interviews administered to EFL learners. Content validity was ensured by consultation with a second expert, Scholfield who evaluated the questionnaire. Moreover, careful attention was paid to other existing vocabulary learning questionnaires (Ahmed, 1988; Stoffer, 1995; Gu and Johnson, 1996; Schmitt, 1997; Kudo, 1999; Nakamura, 2000) and other learning strategies studies and questionnaires in which vocabulary played a relevant role (Naiman et al, 1978; Rubin, 1981; Politzer and McGroarty (1985); O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). In sum, we did not follow the common practice of designing a questionnaire evolved only from other questionnaires in the literature since we thought it was more valid to ground the contents of our questionnaire on what a parallel group of learners would report on their VLS use in an open elicitation. As concerns the reliability of the VLS-Q, it should be stated that no attempt was made to pursue it since this was beyond the scope of the study. Nevertheless, this does not mean that reliability is not as important as validity. As suggested by Scholfield (personal communication, 2001), for the purpose of our study the way the VLS-Q was validated was enough, leaving its reliability for further research.

The VLS-Q included nine Likert-type items concerned with dictionary used strategies (dictionary types and look-up behaviour). The scale ranges from one to six in which 1 means 'never or almost never true of me,' 2 represents 'rarely or seldom true of me,' 3 means 'sometimes not true of me,' 4 equals 'sometimes true of me,' 5 represents 'generally true of me,' and 6 means 'always or nearly always true of me.' The statements are shown below:

10. I look up the word in an English-Spanish-English dictionary.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. I look up the word in my electronic translator.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. I look up the word in an English-English dictionary.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I look up the word on the internet if possible, (i.e. on-line dictionaries).	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I look up the word in the dictionary and check its meaning(s).	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I look up the word in the dictionary and check its pronunciation.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. I look up the word in the dictionary and check its spelling.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I look up the word in the dictionary and check its grammatical category (i.e. if the word is a verb, noun, adjective or both a verb and noun).	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I look up the word in the dictionary and check example sentences and/or fixed expressions.	1	2	3	4	5	6

To sum up, the scores of these items were statistically analysed by considering mean frequency ratings. By using ANOVA we were able to determine any significant differences among the types of dictionaries used and the rank order of frequency use.

4. Results and discussion

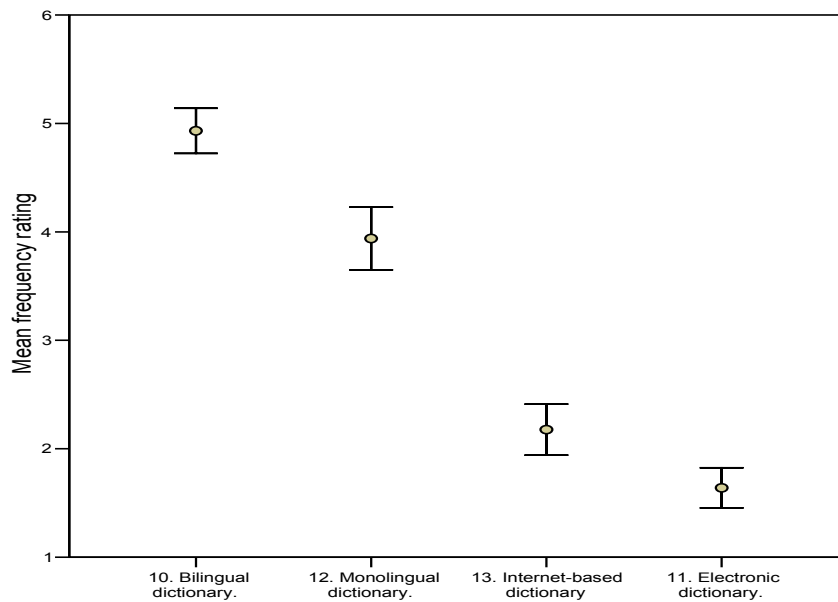
As pointed out above, our concern in this study is to find out whether there are differences in the use of four types of dictionaries: bilingual, monolingual, electronic, and internet-based. Likewise, we look into the order of frequency with which different kinds of information are generally looked up by the whole sample. Table 4.1 shows the frequency mean rating for each of the nine strategies included in this category.

Table 4.1 Summary of the use of dictionary strategies by all subjects

Rank	Dictionary Use Strategies	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
1	14. Use dictionary to check meaning(s).	150	5.1000	1.17439
2	10. Look up word in bilingual dictionary.	150	4.9067	1.30228
3	18. Use dictionary to check examples/fixed expressions.	148	4.9054	1.30586
4	16. Use dictionary to check spelling.	150	4.6333	1.38746
5	15. Use dictionary to check pronunciation.	150	4.4333	1.40668
6	17. Use dictionary to check part of speech.	150	4.0600	1.59374
7	12. Look up word in monolingual dictionary.	148	3.9257	1.77699
8	13. Look up word in www.	149	2.1745	1.43664
9	11. Look up word in electronic dictionary.	150	1.6600	1.15758

From Table 4.1 some relevant differences in dictionary preferences can be readily observed. These differences were corroborated via one-way within-subjects ANOVA, which showed significant differences in type of dictionaries ($F_{(3, 438)} = 169.076, p < 0.001$). The Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons was performed to check for valid significant differences. The results showed that bilingual dictionaries are used significantly more often than monolingual dictionaries ($p < 0.001$). This result appears to be consistent with what Schmitt (1997) found among Japanese learners of English and with Tomaszczyk (1979). More importantly, such a result allows us to support hypothesis RH-1B that predicted more use of bilingual dictionaries. Monolingual dictionaries, in turn, are used significantly more often than electronic dictionaries ($p < 0.001$), but internet-based dictionaries are used more often than electronic ones ($p < 0.002$), which are in turn the least-frequently used reference works in the study (RH-1C). Figure 4.1 illustrates better the differences in dictionary use among learners regardless of their university year of study, gender, and/or vocabulary proficiency.

Figure 4.1 The use of dictionaries among all learners



These findings confirm that learners rely heavily on bilingual dictionaries, which may be a bit surprising for English majors. However, this may also be due to the fact that many learners ($n = 66$) were in their first year of studies, which may be taken as synonymous for low levels of language proficiency. We further explored this possibility and found that first-year learners reported using more bilingual than monolingual dictionaries, but the direction changed slightly across subsequent years of study. Notwithstanding, the mean frequency rating of monolingual dictionary use seems to be also quite high on the scale (mean = 3.92), which was expected from English-major learners. Moreover, the low frequency rating of electronic and internet-based dictionaries was also expected as we know from experience that they are not very popular among Mexican university learners. Both in the preliminary and this main study, electronic and internet-based dictionaries emerged among the least-frequently used VLS. In a nutshell, it can be suggested that this finding is characteristic of these learners, but not in Asian learners, as reported by Yonnaly and Gilfert (1995).

Of interest in dictionary studies is to find out the kind of information that L2 learners most look up in dictionaries in addition to the frequency with which they use different types of dictionaries (RQ-1E). The results of our study indicate that, in order of frequency, learners use dictionaries to check (1) meaning(s), (2) examples and fixed expressions, (3) spelling, (4) pronunciation, and (5) part of speech (see Table 6.4). This finding is more or less consistent with Tomaszczyk (1979), Baxter (1980), Bejoint (1981), Battenburg (1991), and Nakamura (2000). Through one-way within-subjects ANOVA we found a significant difference in the frequency with which these kinds of information are looked up ($F_{(4, 588)} = 24.593, p < 0.001$). However, The Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons showed no significant differences between (1) and (2); (2) and (3); (3) and (4); and (4) and (5). Obviously,

significant differences were detected between (1) and (3), (4), (5); (2) and (4, $p < 0.003$), (5); (3) and (5): ($p < 0.001$ for the other pairs). In sum, apart from a word's meaning, the learners of our study appear to pay a great deal of attention to the example sentences and fixed expressions maybe because they would like to know how the word is used in context. It is also worthy of note that these five strategies obtained mean frequency ratings above 4, which place them in the second most frequently used VLS category.

4. Conclusions

We have observed that bilingual dictionaries are widely used by EFL learners even though one may have expected monolingual dictionaries to be preferred by English major students. On the other hand electronic and web-based dictionaries are occasionally used by the whole sample. It should be noted that further analyses showed that the use of monolingual dictionaries seem to increase across years of study at university; however, such use appears to decrease in year five. Regarding the information looked up either in bilingual or monolingual dictionaries, it can be suggested that these English-major students view dictionaries as good sources of English, namely, meaning(s), example sentences, fixed expressions, spelling, pronunciation, and grammar.

Finally, the main pedagogical implications of this study may be referred to as practical ones. It has been suggested that dictionary use strategies should be integrated into language courses both for reception and production processes. In other words, language teachers should spend more time training students on the use of dictionaries, regardless of the types of dictionaries. Ideally, advanced learners should use monolingual dictionaries more often than bilingual dictionaries; however, this is not always the case as shown in this study.

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Biodata

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