Self-Investigation into Chinese EFL Learners' Perceptions and Habits of Online English Dictionary Use

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Abstract

Computer-mediated dictionaries are currently a widespread method and a prominent subfield in meta-lexicography in the digital era. Numerous studies have focused on the link between language learning and dictionary usage. Additionally, there is a persistent and growing tendency among EFL learners toward frequently using online and electronic dictionaries rather than hardcopy printed ones. The present article conducted a critical examination of Chinese EFL learners' alternatives to and practices for using online English dictionaries. The researcher drew a convenience sample of 84 Chinese International College students. Additionally, the lexical competency of all participants was examined. This research further examined the association between Chinese learners' English vocabulary competence levels and their choices for online English dictionaries. A questionnaire was provided to elicit information on students' habits and perceptions regarding the use of online English dictionaries. The findings of this survey revealed that learners' favorite and most frequently used online English dictionaries varied per student. The shortcomings of online English dictionary usage were discovered alongside various research limitations being raised for further debate.

Keywords: Online English Dictionary, Chinese EFL Learners, Perceptions, and Habits of English Dictionary Use

1. Introduction

D'Astoli (2016) used to suggest that the capacity to communicate in a foreign language enables individuals to gain a greater understanding of one another on any level. Thus, individuals think that learning a foreign language is necessary for survival and work to increase their understanding of the language. However, many individuals struggle with the meaning, intonation, and use of words throughout the learning process. As a result, the dictionary becomes a vital aid for people who struggle with foreign language acquisition. In the era of digitization and globalization, reading foreign language texts is becoming more and more normal and unexceptional, and computer-mediated dictionaries are perceived as the most prevalent and widely-used supplementary tools. In recent years, more and more researchers have been working on the effectiveness of computer-mediated dictionaries in reading, the usage of online dictionaries, and the impact of the convenience of computer dictionaries (Husaini, 2020; Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020). There is a plethora of studies constantly published and associated with the relationship between online dictionary use and EFL learners' language learning (Hakim et al., 2018; Healy, 2018; Shojaei & Motallebzadeh, 2016; Huang & Eslami, 2013). All of these studies have clearly suggested new and insightful ideas about how English dictionary use would be able to benefit EFL learners' comprehension of words throughout the written context and even language output, such as lexical tests, written translation, etc.

(Miyazaki, 2019; Norri, 2016). Under these circumstances, lexicography in terms of pedagogical domain would have served as promising evidence in the provision of constructive information toward the effective use of an online English dictionary for EFL learners.

From a broad perspective, the effectiveness of consulting a dictionary would be determined based on individual diverse language proficiency, selection of a dictionary, and skills toward using a dictionary, etc. (Journal & Aloraini, 2018; Ahangari & Abbasi Dogolsara, 2015). To put it differently, diverse learners may possess a different type and range of information to consult from dictionaries. Then, it would be vital to grasp a profound understanding of how language learners select dictionaries alongside the information for them to acquire based on their expectations. Thus far, previous studies have linked user expectations and dictionary selection, which could possibly explain why dictionaries could be seen as prestigious and inexhaustible information resources (Nesi, 2014; Töpel, 2014; Lew, 2016). Additionally, our rapidly evolving digital culture has increased the global appeal of online dictionaries. Shamar (2020) points out that online dictionaries seem to be advantageous in terms of visually and audibly displaying foreign terminology. Accordingly, learners value online or physical dictionaries equally for their respective advantages.

Throughout Asian countries, EFL learners are increasingly using online and pocket electronic dictionaries over printed dictionaries (Chen et al., 2021; Pedrazzini, 2012). Online dictionaries are still controversial among language scholars and instructors, with some questioning their efficacy as a tool for continuous self-directed language learning. Some scholars believe internet dictionaries are as detrimental to students' English learning as calculators are to arithmetic (Milic et al., 2018). In the era of knowledge, students should acquire reference skills to use helpful web sources. For this reason, instructors and researchers must understand more about how dictionaries could be adopted to improve dictionary architecture and facilitate students' consultation skills. In addition, the ability to utilize a dictionary correctly helps students improve their communication and academic performance at school (Lew, 2015; Li & Xu, 2015). As a result, the quality of English instruction has greatly improved. Using a dictionary to learn a language indeed demands a high level of expertise, which explicitly demonstrates that the current lexicography study trend regularly examines significant themes and draws new academics. The current research tracks dictionary usage throughout teacher-assigned activities, allowing participants to access whichever online dictionary they consider preferable. An online dictionary is used to explore learners' expectations and choices. The objective of this investigation is to explore the following questions in hopes of giving potential answers: 1) What are the most commonly used online dictionaries among EFL students; 2) What are their thoughts on using an online dictionary; 3) What are their shortcomings in the search process.

2. Literature Review

There is evidence that students who use dictionaries to look up terms while reading, listening, or writing improve their vocabulary (Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016). It allows immediate access to several levels of lexical knowledge and may be used for numerous things, including word definitions, which means that language learners may acquire new vocabulary by themselves by utilizing dictionaries. Moreover, using student-generated dictionaries helps vocabulary development as well as text comprehension (El-Sayed et al., 2014; Dashetstani, 2013; Chen, 2012), while Davoudi (2016) found that using a dictionary helps retain terms. Besides, the use of electronic dictionaries to study foreign languages has grown in popularity. As a result, more students are using electronic dictionaries for EFL (Dashtestani, 2013) Electronic dictionaries have improved considerably in the last three decades (Rezaei &

Davoudi, 2016). Since the late 1980s, the public has been able to get electronic dictionaries on CD-ROM, compact hand-held calculator-type reference works (i.e., Pocket Electronic Dictionary), and online (Mohamad et al., 2017). Rezaei & Davoudi (2016) claim that electronic dictionaries are useful in numerous ways. Compared to paper dictionaries, electronic dictionaries are easier to read and use, saving time during consultation. Due to the fast development of the Internet, smartphones, and iPads, academics have started to exhibit an interest in online dictionaries (Hafsha, 2020; Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016). That is to say, learners are visibly impacted by the world's technology and are interested in the newest gadgets. Language learners are increasingly using electronic dictionaries as new technical tools for vocabulary study.

The usage of dictionaries and e-dictionaries to learn new words has increased dramatically in the last two decades (Dashtestani, 2013; Hua & Zarei, 2013; Davoudi, 2016; Li & Xu, 2015; Nesi, 2009). Thus, this portion emphasized some of the themes that aided this exploratory study. Dashtestani (2013) surveyed Iranian EFL students and instructors on the role of e-dictionaries. The research included 126 EFL students and 73 EFL instructors who completed questionnaires. 81 students and 66 instructors were interviewed again. Faculty and students in EFL have mixed feelings about using electronic dictionaries to study EFL. A lack of training, students utilizing inappropriate electronic dictionaries, lack of facilities for using electronic dictionaries in EFL classes, and distraction from learning are identified as difficulties and problems. Data research found that most Iranian EFL students utilize electronic dictionaries on their phones. The students preferred electronic dictionaries over print dictionaries. Identically, Veliz (2017) has discussed EFL instructors' and students' attitudes to pocket electronic dictionaries (PEDs), the devices' more or less important characteristics, and practical approaches and natural procedures for using these devices to facilitate, rather than hinder, the learning process. According to Veliz (2017), teacher opinions ranged from "It's great to see students' using dictionaries independently" to "I'm not bringing them into my classroom." Additionally, some students looked up more than twenty words every class, while others utilized them at home to supplement their knowledge of lexis from school.

To better understand how electronic reference resources are used and their influence on L2 learning, Yükselir (2016) decided it was necessary to research their use and impact. These days, many Asian students of English use electronic pocket dictionaries to help them learn English. Between EDs and PDs, Japanese college students were polled. There was also a link between students' ED usage and their participation in lexical processing strategies (LPS; consult, infer, or snub). Another relevant study used a search engine to help and speed up the process of looking up an unknown term or phrase (Takkaç, 2017; Nauman et al., 2013).The search method hyperlinked the headword list's words and expressions to subject terms and basic synonyms. The researchers asserted that expert ESL authors might benefit from the search system's ability to zero in on appropriate phraseology for a given context. They discovered that electronic texts conveyed word preferences, implying that a lexical dictionary could improve English idiomatic encoding and decoding. Overall, the aforementioned studies provide an overview of the word looking-up process, key decision-making elements, and study techniques. The extensive literature both increases views on dictionary usage and provides critical concepts for conducting this exploratory investigation.

3. Methodology

Participants

A total of 84 individuals were recruited from two English classes (Class A = 45 and Class B = 39) at Chinese International College, ranging in age from 18 to 22 years. Participants

were recruited specifically from two English classrooms (Class A = 45, Class B = 39). Class A consisted of undergraduate students majoring in international business, whereas Class B consisted of undergraduate students majoring in tourism management and finance accounting. It was conducted when the participants were enrolled in the basic courses "Reading" and "English Writing." The purpose of this research is to ascertain how he or she makes judgments about the selection and use of an online dictionary, as well as their views toward using an online dictionary.

Research Instruments

Two instrumental tools were used in the research, including the Vocabulary Size Levels Test and a Questionnaire Survey. The vocabulary level quiz was sourced directly from the website Online Lexical Size Test, which has a variety of different sorts of vocabulary tests. The present study, in particular, used Yes-No assessments, which require test takers to check a box indicating their familiarity with a given topic. The researcher followed Gillham's (2000) criteria for conducting a questionnaire survey for conducting the questionnaire survey. The questionnaire (originally in Chinese but translated into English) was designed to establish students' sentiments regarding the use of online dictionaries, covering a total of 17 items. Besides, throughout these items, the researcher was able to explore and collect the responses or feedback category labels of "dictionary function, Chinese-English definition, Chinese equivalent, sentence examples, pronunciation, user satisfaction level, part of speech, phrases, terminology, synonyms, syntactic pattern, collocations, context, etc." Concerning personal demographic information, three components comprise the questionnaire: 1) an individual's meta-data; 2) a list of the most popular online dictionaries; 3) Participants picked information categories from online dictionaries. The first section was designed to gather some required personal information, while the second section inquired about the specific online dictionaries students used and ranked them accordingly. The last section featured sixteen questions designed to elicit students' impressions of online dictionary usage using the 5-degree Likert Scale (Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree).

On the other hand, participants used web resources to read and develop dictionary consulting jobs. The reading materials comprised of snippets from ordinary events collected from an Oxford University Press English language-learning website. The website includes a variety of instructional activities and tools, such as a glossary of English terms and articles on common topics. The key reason for selecting internet-based material was to introduce learners to something fresh. Furthermore, the paragraphs are concise. This gave participants more flexibility and time to finish their projects. The participants were provided a reading assignment that included two brief articles and a translation challenge that included four highlighted phrases.

Research Procedure

The participants were initially requested to complete a vocabulary exam, followed by a preparatory session during which they were encouraged to practice utilizing online dictionaries for in-class readings. This increased their exposure to online dictionary consulting activities. Following the four-week practice session, the questionnaire was used to elicit feedback from participants about the functioning of online dictionaries, their impressions of information kinds or decision making, and their challenges. Five further steps were taken to complete the data collecting operation, and they were demonstrated as follows:

1) Participants choose their own online dictionary, with no guidance on how to use it
2) They had to read web articles and note down unfamiliar terms
3) They looked for word definitions in Chinese dictionaries online
4) Then they had to have English translated into Chinese

5) They had to fill out the questionnaire while writing down their thoughts and concerns.

Each student in the two courses received a questionnaire in Chinese. Out of 84 questionnaires, a total of 71 questionnaires from 17 men and 55 females were valid, resulting in an 85.0 percent response rate. Two phases were included in the questionnaire analysis procedure. The first step was to get a complete profile of each participant, including their age, years of English study, their usage of internet resources, and their vocabulary level. The second group analyzed Likert-type and open-ended items. The Likert-type questions were used to ascertain students' use patterns and general opinions regarding online dictionaries. They elicited answers on a number scale (e.g., strongly disagree =1, highly disagree =2, neutral=3, agree=4, and strongly agree=5). The researcher was able to codify the open-ended questions in terms of student response rates since they were intended to capture the reasons students picked or favored. The data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) version 24.0 for Windows.

4. Results and Discussion

The data analysis findings were given in Table 1 with three information respectively, including an overall participant description, a rating of online dictionaries, and an item analysis. The average student age was 19.6, the year length of English learning were 7.5, and the frequency of accessing Internet resources was 3.89 on a 5-point scale. The highest score 5 means 'most often'. These descriptive statistics highlighted the key aspects of using online reference materials. For example, the current research sought to learn if students' higher word levels influenced their dictionary choices. It might then be analyzed for additional research interpretation when these data are measured.

Table 1. Participants Demographic Information

Participants (N=71 Valid Response Count)	Average
Male	17 (20%)
Female	55 (65%)
Age	19.6 Years Old
Professions	
International Business	45 Students
Tourism Management & Finance Accounting	39 Students
Rate of Response	85.0 %
Length of Learning English	7.5 Years
Rate of Internet Resource Use	3.89 (5-point Likert Scale)

The questionnaire survey was used to find out the answer to the first research question What are the most commonly used online dictionaries among EFL students. This research asked students to perform translation assignments before calculating their replies to online dictionaries. Which online dictionaries do you most regularly use? Finally, a 5-point scale was generated and ranked. To answer the first study question, the findings indicate that students favored the following five online dictionaries, as detailed in Table 2, including *Google Translate (4.87), Yahoo Dictionary (4.26), Cambridge Online Dictionary (4.17), Online WordReference Dictionary (3.65), Wikitionary (2.78).*

Table 2. Ranking of Most Commonly Used Online Dictionary

Name of Online Dictionary	Mean	SD	Rank
Google Translate (https://translate.google.com)	4.87	0.84	1
Yahoo Dictionary (https://hk.dictionary.search.yahoo.com/)	4.26	0.71	2
Cambridge Dictionary (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/zht/)	4.17	0.65	3
WordReference Dictionary (https://www.wordreference.com)	3.65	1.21	4
Wikitionary (https://www.wiktionary.org/)	2.78	1.56	5

To address the second and third study questions—what perspectives and flaws they have about the usage of online dictionaries—the researcher developed 16 items of scaled questions to ascertain their perceptions about real consulting activities. For comparative purposes, the five-point scale answers were collapsed into a three-point simplified scale, namely strongly disagree/disagree; neutral; and agree/strongly agree. All of the sub-items are generated from the twelve major categories, which include the Chinese definition, the English definition, the Chinese equivalent, an example, the pronunciation, the word class, the phrases, the synonym, the syntactic pattern, the collocations, and the context. Additionally, two areas were assessed, including general evaluations of dictionary operations and user happiness.

Table 3. Participants' Perceptions Regarding Use of Online Dictionary

Linguistic Category	Item	SA-A %	Neutral %	SD-D %	Mean	SD
1. Dictionary Functions	1	68.1	21.6	10.3	3.76	.36
2. User Satisfaction Level	17	67.9	21.4	10.7	3.55	.31
3. Chinese Definition	8	68.8	24.9	6.3	3.74	.37
4. English Definition	6	46.7	30.9	22.4	3.16	.48
5. Chinese Equivalent	5	70.8	22.3	6.9	3.64	.39
6. Examples	3	63.4	25.0	11.6	3.57	.43
7. Pronunciation	7	39.7	27.9	32.4	3.08	.66
8. Part of Speech	12	30.9	39.7	29.4	2.53	.58
9. Phrases	9	22.3	44.6	33.1	2.57	.55
10. Terminology	15	16.1	32.1	51.8	2.65	.61
11. Synonym	11	31.8	28.9	39.3	2.98	.56
12. Syntactic Pattern	10	21.4	33.1	45.5	3.06	.48
13. Collocation Use	13	20.5	30.2	49.3	2.78	.73
14. Context Relevance	16	24.3	36.0	39.7	2.61	.69

Using an online dictionary to decode and encode texts for reading and translating tasks is shown in Table 3. In the look-up procedure, these linguistic actions were grouped as information categories. According to replies to items 1 and 2, more than half of those polled (68.1%) knew of the dictionaries' capabilities and 67.9% said they were satisfied with their usage. The majority of students (68.8%) used online dictionaries to look up Chinese definitions and equivalents (Item 3 & 5). 63.4% of students said instances of the target term being appropriately used were valuable models for word use in Item 4 and 6. However, 11.6 percent disagreed with the use of examples, and 25.0 percent were unclear. The use of examples was not always understood by one third of the students (36.6%). Examples of use, context, grammar, and collocation were found to be more useful than straight definitions in interpreting meaning by Bestelmeyer (2018) and Gotti (2014). Understanding how to apply the examples supplied will greatly improve dictionary usage efficacy. Regarding Item 7—pronunciation, only 39.7 percent of respondents said that they looked up an unfamiliar term and also checked its

pronunciation. However, it seemed as if knowing a word via its sound was not necessary for certain language learners. Additionally, it was because a few online dictionaries did not have a sounding-out feature, but merely provided phonetic symbols. The second explanation for the low response rate was the translation assignments. Due to the fact that translation does not need pronunciation, they may have overlooked this feature of the information kinds. Item 8's results on part of speech indicated that students did not regularly employ part of speech (30.9%). The proportion of terms used decreased even more (22.3%). This partly suggested that individuals may have difficulties while searching for terms using online dictionaries. They often were unable to locate the whole of phrases such as 'alive and kicking'. They understood the term 'alive' in this circumstance by returning to its Chinese equivalent, 'living'. This actually hampered their comprehension and application of the sentence, resulting in interference mistakes. The larger proportion of disagreement suggested that these categories were less familiar, as seen by Item 10, 11 and 12. (51.8 percent, 39.3 percent and 45.5 percent, respectively). Also in considerable disagreement (49.3% and 39.7%) were collocation and context, with three main causes for disagreement. As a result of their limited vocabulary, they lacked the English skill to impose context. Another problem is that students were never taught to utilize context or collocation in English-Chinese dictionaries. For many elements of English instruction, my students utilized online dictionaries for their ease, quickness, and availability. Because of this, they acquire a false belief that words are linked one-to-one. Most beginners depend largely on the dictionary to determine word definitions. In other words, less vocabularies means less ability to use online dictionaries effectively.

5. Conclusion

On a final note, this investigation discovered the top five most often used online dictionaries as Google Translate, Yahoo Dictionary, Cambridge Online Dictionary, Online Word Reference Dictionary, and Wiktionary. It's worth noting that they're all multilingual online dictionaries. Google Translate was ranked and favored by students as the top 1 online dictionary. A potential reason for the findings is that the majority of students firmly thought Google Translate was beneficial to their learning process (Castelvechhi, 2016; Bin, 2020). This is mainly because college students' English proficiency may be restricted, and learners often transition from L1 to L2 (Tsai, 2020; Alsalem, 2019). Technological improvements have led in the development of a number of tools to aid learners in overcoming barriers, with Google Translate being the most popular choice among students. (Chompurach, 2021). In general, they thought that online dictionaries' functionalities were acceptable for their purposes (Morris et al., 2016). 67.9 percent of the 71 respondents to the questionnaire study felt that the general circumstances of online dictionaries satisfied them.

The research found the drawbacks of online dictionary usage from questionnaire questions with less than 30% favorable attitude. These included context (24.2%), phrases (22.3%), syntactic patterns (21.4%), collocation (20.5%) and terminology (20.5%). (16.1 percent). Besides, several limitations were identified in this investigation. One reason is that participants were prompted to utilize online dictionaries by performing translation assignments, which may have discouraged them from looking up the pronunciation of an unknown term (Medvedev, 2016; Groves & Mundt, 2015). It may be accomplished more accurately for future study by substituting dialogic texts for translation assignments in communicative learning activities. Additionally, therapy time should be factored in, since some of the students have never utilized online dictionaries. The last constraint is related to a lesser degree of linguistic skill (Chon & Shin, 2020; Chen et al., 2015). English proficiency is thought to have an

influence on dictionary usage (Lee, 2020; Gestantil et al., 2019). Nonetheless, the research did not assess the individuals' overall English skills.

In an ideal world, online dictionaries would be utilized to gather information about words, to aid in vocabulary acquisition, to serve as a modeling resource for L2 learners, and to serve as a respectable foundation for boosting autonomous learning (Raza & Nor, 2018). As a result, it is recommended that instructors provide students with some reference skills training and enable them to utilize appropriate online dictionaries. It is obvious to academics that the majority of English-Chinese bilingual dictionaries might be improved by giving shorter collocations and more relevant examples (Wu et al., 2016). The preliminary research adds minimally to the survey of online bilingual dictionaries for undergraduate students' studying English as a second language. It opens the path for future research by tracking dictionary users' choices (more preferences) and actions (specific habits) through a log file. Additionally, certain novel search methods used in the look-up process provide exciting study topics.

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