A Contrastive Study of the Use of Pocket Electronic and Print Dictionaries

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Abstract. A dictionary is an indispensable tool for EFL learners to explore new words, as the acquisition of vocabulary is an essential part of second language learning. Significant differences can be found among students’ attitudes toward PEDs and PDs, largely divided according to their field of study.

Introduction

A dictionary is one of the most important tools for EFL learners to grasp a foreign language. Different types of dictionaries are published to cater for the various requirements of EFL learners. As Kirkness comments, the dictionary is an instrument for lexical reference, which ‘classifies and stores information in print or, increasingly, electronic form and has an access system or systems designed to allow users to retrieve the information in full or in part as readily as possible’ [1].

Regarding the types of information that are covered in the dictionary, Kirkness points out that, ‘the information is essentially linguistic and may include material on the form, meaning, use, origin, and history of words, phrases, and other lexical items’ [1]. Accordingly, the dictionary contains comprehensive information on vocabulary. It indicates that consulting a dictionary is common practice by EFL learners, both inside and outside of the English classroom.

Apart from traditional print dictionaries (PDs), a variety of electronic versions, such as pocket electronic dictionaries, CD-ROM, and online dictionaries are viable options for lexical reference. Particularly, since the advent of pocket electronic dictionaries (PEDs), these have spread among EFL learners, and dramatically changed learners’ patterns of dictionary use. The fact is that PEDs are increasingly popular among EFL learners, even though many teachers maintain negative perceptions towards them. This controversy between students’ frequent use of PEDs and teachers’ predominantly negative attitudes towards them inspired me to conduct a survey to compare the use of PEDs and PDs among students and to examine perceptions of PEDs’ and PDs’ relative strengths and weaknesses.

A Comparison between the Use of Pocket Electronic and Print Dictionaries

It is generally admitted that vocabulary is essential for encoding and decoding a second foreign language. As McCarthy states, ‘without words to express a wider range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way’ [2]. However, the sheer size of most modern languages (and English in particular) makes it unlikely that EFL learners will grasp all of encountered vocabulary. Therefore, it is necessary to explore an efficient way of interpreting new vocabulary.

It is certain that a dictionary contains comprehensive information which can be used to interpret an unfamiliar vocabulary efficiently and accurately. Consulting a dictionary is the conventional method that helps L2 learners to elaborate vocabulary, compared with various ways of exploring a vocabulary. Kirkness claims that the dictionary has been and still is the essential source of information for either native language or foreign language, for all people engaged in literature activities that might have any questions in the aspect of language [1].
A pocket electronic dictionary (PED) is a small hand-held dictionary which is designed with a full keyboard and function keys, and generally a screen display in the lid. In contrast with other electronic dictionaries which require internet connection (online dictionaries) or at least an entire computer system, a PED is a battery operated, portable device. This is the main difference from other forms of electronic dictionaries.

A considerable amount of literature has been published on students’ use of PEDs, which has confirmed the popularity of PEDs among East Asian EFL learners. As regards the advantages of PEDs, most students share common opinions which are generally classified into retrieval speed, portability, availability of sound and multimedia, while some teachers maintain that the retrieval speed and multimedia are the advantages of PEDs.

Speed is the first advantage that attracts EFL learners to use PEDs. The process of consulting PD is divided into six stages which involve encountering a word, remembering spelling, searching alphabetically, refusing other headwords, reading definition and returning to the text, whereas the look-up process is simplified into four stages for PEDs: encountering new words, typing the letters into PED, reading definition and returning to text. Therefore, superficially, it seems that the process of look-up in PEDs is much easier than PDs.

Portability is the second merit of PEDs which is in contrast to the huge size and heavy weight of PDs. As the word suggests, PEDs can be used whenever and wherever you want. Stirling’s study results demonstrate that 50% of the subjects reported that they used their PED while travelling, followed by 40% who used it while chatting in English out of class, 20% when shopping, doing activities, etc. [3]. It is quite interesting to find that PEDs are used when chatting, which is a good sign of communicating independently.

The availability of a sound function is the third superior characteristic of PEDs, which aims to check the intonation and stress of the word or find out how to pronounce the phonetic transcription, which is not available on PDs. Several studies have been conducted to verify the effects of sound function of PEDs in EFL learning. Differences can be found between EFL learners in an L1 environment and an L2 environment; EFL learners who study English in an L1 environment make little use of the sound function (Bower and McMillan [4]). In contrast, in Tang’s study, both surveys and interview results demonstrated that approximately 85% of the subjects used PEDs to check pronunciation [5]. This phenomenon is partially due to China’s English testing system, which stresses the importance of reading, listening and writing while tending to ignore speaking. Thus, when these learners look-up new vocabulary, only the meaning of the word is relevant.

When it comes to the disadvantages of PEDs, the quick, simplified consulting process may lead to overuse. EFL teachers in Tang’s study point out that frequent word translation will seriously impede students’ language development [5]. In contrast with PEDs, EFL teachers maintain that the complex look-up process of a word in PDs can strengthen students’ memory. Therefore, in their opinion, the complex look-up process in PDs can reinforce students’ memory.

Furthermore, compared with the comprehensive and accurate lexis knowledge in PDs, incomplete information in PEDs is the main disadvantage. Stirling implemented a small scale study among EFL teachers which revealed ‘insufficient examples, inaccurate meanings, unintelligible pronunciation, lack of collocations, excess of meanings, and the absence of improvements found in other dictionaries’ are the drawbacks of PEDs [3]. However, both teachers and students maintain that PDs contain comprehensive and accurate information.

In summary, plenty of studies Tang Bower and McMillan demonstrate that both PEDs and PDs are perceived as having different advantages and disadvantages [6, 8]. In the case of PDs, the comprehensive vocabulary information is the most attractive characteristic. The advantages of PEDs are generally classified into four aspects which are retrieval speed, portability, availability of sound and multimedia, and the main disadvantage is the incomplete information. However, recently, several studies demonstrate that the information quality in some PEDs is equivalent with, or even superior to corresponding PDs (Nesi [5]).

Different features of PEDs and PDs may influence students’ perceptions and patterns of use of these two types of dictionary. Chen’s surveyed 96 university students, aiming to investigate their
patterns of dictionary use and perception of PEDs and PDs, while also examining the effects of
dictionaries in the acquisition of vocabulary using PEDs and PDs through questionnaires and tests
[7]. The study results reveal that there are differences between PEDs and PDs in terms of the how
often, when, where, and how students use PEDs and PDs in EFL learning as well as their opinions
towards the advantages and disadvantages of these two types of dictionaries.

In the case of students patterns of dictionary use, Chen’s study demonstrates that PEDs are more
frequently used than PDs, for more than half of students use PEDs more than five times per day,
whereas, 65% of them consult PDs less than once per day [7]. Furthermore, PEDs and PDs are used
for different purposes. The most frequently consulted information in PDs (68.9% of students) is the
examples of use, whereas only 32.7% of students use PEDs to consult examples. As regard to the
places where dictionaries are used, both PEDs and PDs are used most often at home or in the library.
The differences are that a small percentage of students would consult PEDs in the classroom and
during travelling. Apart from this, a majority of subjects in this study consider speed to be one of
the greatest advantages of PEDs and, consequently, PEDs are used in quick decoding activities
while PDs are used for encoding. In the case of developing language skills, this study shows that
PDs are regarded as the most useful for translating by a multitude of students, while only 4.7% of
students perceived PEDs as the most efficient for translating. Thus, there are differences on students’
patterns of PEDs and PDs use.

Similarly, Kobayashi compared the use of PDs with PEDs among 279 Japanese university
students through quantitative and qualitative analysis[8]. Results show that 72% out of 279 students
owned a PED, and they preferred to use a PED more frequently than PD. Apparently PEDs tend to
stimulate the frequency of dictionary consultation of low-proficiency students. According to this
phenomenon, the effects of PEDs on EFL learning are positive to some extent, as they encourage
students to accumulate greater vocabulary. However, this study also reveals that too much
consultation may hinder students’ interaction with contextual clues, as they look up new words
without inferring. Therefore, the pedagogical implication is that training in the use of PEDs should
be provided.

Conclusion

This study investigated the use of PEDs and PDs for EFL learners and examined the strengths
and weaknesses of each. Language learner’s preference for PEDs is attributed to portability, ease of
use, retrieval speed, and availability of sound on PEDs, whereas the large size, heavy weight and
complex look-up procedure of PDs prevents the majority of students from consulting them. So it
might be better for EFL teachers to recognize that PEDs are the predominant consulting tool of EFL
learners, and then design some classroom activities aiming to provide suggestions on how to use
them efficiently where necessary.

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