



An Investigation into English Major Students' Perceptions toward the Use of Monolingual and Bilingual Dictionaries in English Language Learning

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Abstract: This study was an attempt to unveil actual dictionaries practices and the general perceptions toward monolingual and bilingual dictionaries among English majors at Phan Thiet University (UPT). A total of 121 collected responses from delivered paper questionnaires were analyzed to achieve the research purposes. The results showed that the students had the habits of using dictionaries on a daily basis but with varied frequency among the participants. The students also reported utilizing online dictionaries and Google translator more significantly than paper-based dictionaries. The study also revealed that the students had greater preference for bilingual dictionaries rather monolingual dictionaries, though most of the participants were aware of superiority of monolingual dictionaries in giving clear definitions and encouraging learners to think in English. The participants believed that it would be best to combine both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in the English learning process. The paper also put forward some recommendations and strategies that will be helpful for monolingual dictionary use.

Key words: Perception, Online dictionaries, Bilingual dictionaries, Monolingual Dictionaries

I. Introduction

The increasing popularity of learner-centered theories has triggered the production of dictionaries tailored for the demands of learners of different levels. As for foreign language learners, dictionary is an indispensable part of their learning (Lew, 2011). Functions of dictionaries are proved in manifold studies. According to Tseng (2009), dictionaries are reliable sources for learning a second language in terms of uncovering the meaning of unknown words. In other words, dictionaries are sources of information collection about words and their proper usage (Aleeva, & Safiullina, 2016). Concerning the role of dictionaries in helping learning with vocabulary acquisition, Ali (2012) stated that dictionary is proved fruitful in helping learners expand vocabulary range and boost language proficiency. When it comes to learning a foreign language, Pousi (2010) stated that vocabulary acquisition is considered by many to be the most important aspect of foreign language learning. Hence, inevitably, to grasp a second language, learners need to possess a good lexical competence and a certain range of vocabulary, which can only be achieved by means of dictionaries (Koca, Pojani and Jashari-Cicko, 2014). In line with this, Knight (1994) pointed that vocabulary is the top priority in language learning among not only students but also teachers as vocabulary impacts upon syllabus organization, evaluation of learner performance and learning resource supplement. Accordingly, insufficiency of knowledge about vocabulary can hinder learners from acquiring the target language (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011), and they can even make no progress in learning with a lack of vocabulary (Wajahat, Mudassar, & Faiza, 2019). Furthermore, Alhaisoni (2016) pinpointed that mastering skills in using dictionaries can lead to

autonomy learning among learners. As a result, issues related to dictionaries in language learning have been a topic of concern among researchers.

Dictionaries can be found in forms of paper and online in which the latter one is gaining more ubiquity. Many a study investigated learners' perceptions towards the use of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. According to Nesi (2014), studies into dictionary usage and perceptions were conducted in a small scale rather than large scale or long-term funded projects but in a variety of contexts. The present research was an effort to dig into Phan Thiet University English majors' perceptions of the use of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in the language learning process.

Research questions

In order to investigate the students' perspectives on using monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, the researchers aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the students' actual dictionary practices?
2. What were specific monolingual and bilingual dictionaries that the students preferred to use?
3. Which kind of dictionary did the students prefer to use, monolingual dictionaries or bilingual dictionaries?
4. What were the students' attitudes towards monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in their English language learning?

The purposes of the study

The purposes of the study were to gain insight into the students' actual practices of using dictionaries in their English learning regarding their preferable dictionaries, their main purposes as well as their frequency of dictionary usage. In addition, the research attempted to investigate into their attitudes towards monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in terms of strengths and weaknesses of each kind of dictionary along with their evaluation toward the two types of dictionaries.

II. Literature Review

Advantages and disadvantages of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Numerous research findings figured out benefits as well as drawbacks of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Manyfold studies also endeavored to compare the two dictionaries in terms of values they bring to learners.

With regard to the use of monolingual dictionaries, in the views of Wajahat, Mudassar, and Faiza (2019), monolingual dictionaries are acknowledged learning tools in expanding vocabulary. This finding is supported in Baxter's (1980) and Hayati's (2005) studies which indicate high frequency words have better care about different aspects of vocabulary in monolingual dictionaries. In line with this, Wajahat, Mudassar, and Faiza (2019) added that monolingual dictionaries provide learners with plenty of opportunities for activities aiming at language production since they provide flexibility in learning a language. This is because learners need to think in the target language and thus eliminating translation habits of the learners. However, when it comes to predicaments of monolingual dictionaries, Ali (2012) pinpointed that monolingual dictionaries contain word definitions, symbols, and morphology which are challenging for low level learners. However, in the end, teachers in Ali's study (2012) recommended students to use monolingual dictionaries because they will help them acquire a foreign language more effectively. Findings in Alhaisoni, (2016) indicated the same things as monolingual dictionaries should be encouraged to use to accelerate learners' fluency since vocabulary is explained in specific contexts.

Concerning usage of bilingual dictionaries, many a study found that bilingual dictionaries in general and electronic dictionaries in specific are more in favor of due to factors related to effectiveness, time convenience, and straightforwardness for the acquisition of L2 (Laufer & Hadar, 1997; Ali, 2012; Alhaisoni, 2016). Besides, bilingual dictionaries secure learners with concrete and desired meanings (Yorio, 1971).

However, bilingual dictionaries also bear some limitations, Boxer (1980) stated that bilingual dictionaries with simply the provision of word translation equivalents might sometimes confuse and cause ambiguity for learners. In other words, users of bilingual dictionaries are often restricted to think in foreign language, thus hindering them from acquiring language proficiency. Furthermore, Thompson (1987) pinpointed that bilingual dictionaries do not assist learners in advancing their academic skills such as paraphrasing and provide little knowledge about language semantics. Notwithstanding some restrictions of bilingual dictionaries, learners preferred bilingual dictionaries as they function as a translation tool as well as reference to monolingual entries (Alhaisoni, 2016). Additionally, usage of bilingual dictionaries is more beneficial and effective for learners to understand texts than monolingual dictionaries as they contain definitions and less morphological information which is straightforward for learners (Alhaisoni, 2016).

Previous studies on students' preference of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Findings regarding students' preference of the two dictionary types are varied. A paper conducted by Ayupova (2014) found that learners prefer monolingual dictionaries in learning a foreign language while bilingual dictionaries play a pivotal role in learning translation and interpretation. However, generally, previously conducted research showed that a majority of EFL learners preferably wanted to use bilingual dictionaries despite satisfying with monolingual dictionaries since bilingual dictionaries are time-saving, straightforward and easy to use (Tomaszczyk, 1979; Schmit, 2002; Loucky, 2003; Ali, 2012; Alhaisoni, 2016; Wajahat, Mudassar, & Faiza, 2019). Results in Lew's research (2011) revealed that learners found monolingual dictionaries quite challenging to use compared to bilingual dictionaries since definitions are difficult to understand as far as grammatical structures are concerned. According to Wajahat, Mudassar, and Faiza (2019), bilingual dictionaries are more preferable among low proficient learners rather than advanced students as monolingual dictionaries tend to give lengthy definition to let learners guess and predict the word meanings which might lead to confusion and doubt. In line with this, Lew (2011) found less proficient students tend to find monolingual dictionaries demanding when it comes to understanding word definitions and symbols. Interestingly and noticeably, Schemitt's findings (1997) indicated the opposite trend as Japanese EFL students were in favor of bilingual dictionaries regardless of their high language proficiency level.

III. Methodology

Participants

A group of 121 English majors of UPT including 26 males and 95 females were chosen to be the participants of the study. The sample were in their first, second, and third year. There was not much difference in the number of the participants among school years. The study employed purposive sampling in choosing the participants since the researcher had been well conscious that the selected subjects meet fundamental and essential requirements for the research purposes and research questions (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012).

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

	Current academic school year				Gender	
	1 st year	2 nd year	3 rd year	4 th year	Male	Female
Frequency	35	42	44	0	26	95
%	28.9	34.7	36.4	0	21.5	78.5

Instrument

According to Nunan (1992), investigating people's perceptions, behavior, activities, or attitudes would be best by means of questionnaire. Thomas (2003) further added that questionnaires allow researchers to collect a large quantity of factual information in a relative short period of time. As a result, after taking into consideration conspicuous strengths of employing questionnaires in serving the purposes of the research as

well as carefully evaluating the current situation, the researcher made a decision to use questionnaire as the main data collection instrument.

Students' perceptions toward monolingual and bilingual dictionaries were measured in form of a survey research design by means of the self-designed questionnaire. There were totally 10 questions in the questionnaire consisting of two parts, namely students' actual dictionary practices and students' perceptions toward the use of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in their learning. Specifically, the first six questions in part One were devoted to finding out actual dictionary practices, while the last four questions were utilized to gain insight into their attitudes toward monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. The first eight questions were in form of multiple choices in which the participants could choose more than one option; however, the last two questions employed a 5-point scale were to score the agreement levels of aspects regarding students' perceptions of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries based on the following criteria.

Table 2. The criteria of the agreement levels of aspects concerning students' perceptions of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Scale	Mean range	Agreement level
1	1.00-1.49	Strongly disagree
2	1.50-2.49	Disagree
3	2.50-3.49	Undecided
4	3.50-4.49	Agree
5	4.50-5.00	Strongly agree

A total of 130 questionnaires were delivered to the selected sample group. As a result, 121 responses were recorded, accounting a response rate of 93%. Results then were analyzed by SPSS Statistics 20. The data was analyzed, tabulated and interpreted using means, percentages and frequencies, in which mean (M) was used to calculate the average level of agreement of aspects concerning the students' perceptions of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Standard Deviation (S.D.) depicted the spread of the scores of the respondents within the respondent group.

IV. Results and Discussion

Students' actual dictionary practices

The findings showed that almost 96% of the participants used online dictionaries in their learning. This finding was in line with Li and Su's study (2015) as over 70% of the students in her study used online dictionaries more often than the paper ones, which led to her conclusion about the upcoming ending era of paper dictionaries. Besides, numerous studies have indicated the strengths of digital dictionaries over paper-based ones in terms of time-saving and convenient features as well as illustration of both visual and audio approaches (Shamar, 2020),

Table 3. Students' preference of paper and online dictionaries

Kinds of dictionary	Frequency	%
Paper-based dictionaries	5	4.1
Online dictionaries	116	95.9
Total	121	100.0

The surveyed students showed good habits of dictionaries using as approximately 70% of them used dictionaries every day in their learning (Table 4).

Table 4. Students' frequency of dictionary use

Daily use of dictionaries	Frequency	%
Yes	83	68.6
No	38	31.4
Total	121	100.0

However, as shown in table 5, the frequency of their usage was varied among the participants. Particularly, a majority of the surveyed students assessed dictionaries about 4 to 6 times a day, while very few students used dictionaries over 10 times daily. The findings also showed that smartphones were by far the most ubiquitous tool being used, which was completely comprehensible as according to Cavus and Ibrahim (2009), smartphones by nature were portable and convenient to assess anytime and anywhere.

Table 5. Students' actual practices of online dictionaries

	Frequency per day						Electronic devices		
	1-3 times	4-6 times	7-9 times	10-13 times	14-16 times	Over 16 times	Smart phone	Laptop	Tablet
Frequency	26	49	19	7	9	10	115	47	3
%	21.5	40.5	15.7	5.8	7.4	8.3	69.7	28.5	1.8

Results about purposes of the students assessing dictionaries indicated noticeable information about reasons for their uses of dictionaries. As indicated from table 6, checking new words was the main reason for the students to assess dictionaries. This finding was the same with Alhaisoni's study (2016) in which meaning was reported to be the most sought-after information among the participants. It was understandable that checking pronunciation and word spellings were also their common purposes of using dictionaries. Interestingly, nearly 50% of the participants used dictionaries to find examples of words in contextual sentences, which indicated that the students took into consideration of word applications in real contexts. The findings also showed that aspects such as collocations and transcriptions received less attention from the students.

Table 6. Students' purposes of dictionary usage

Purposes of using dictionaries	Frequency	% of cases
Checking new words	114	94.2
Checking synonyms and antonyms	73	60.3
Checking collocations	35	28.9
Checking pronunciation	95	78.5
Looking for transcriptions	40	33.1
Finding examples	55	45.5
Checking word spellings	75	62.0
Checking grammatical features	48	39.7
Checking singular and plural forms	51	42.1

Students' perceptions toward monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

As shown in tables 7 and 8, when it comes to the kind of dictionary employed by the students when learning, it was surprising to find out that only approximately 6% of the students merely utilized monolingual dictionaries in their English learning, and just little over 25% of them employed both kinds of dictionary when learning English. It means that a majority of the participants, at nearly 70%, used bilingual dictionaries more regularly than monolingual dictionaries. This finding was in line with results found in papers of Alhaisoni (2016), Ali (2012) and Wajahat, et al. (2019) which indicated that bilingual dictionaries are utilized more often than monolingual dictionaries in EFL contexts. The results also indicated that the students used bilingual dictionaries in translation and reading more often than other skills, namely writing, listening, and speaking.

Stein (1989) pinpointed that bilingual dictionaries are useful for comprehension as they give general understanding of certain kinds of words related to biological scientific and cultural terms. Also, bilingual dictionaries are effective in providing translation equivalents for frequency words as well as technical and scientific terms (Stein, 1989).

Table 7. Students' dictionary preference

Preference between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries	Frequency	% of cases
Bilingual dictionaries	83	68.6
Monolingual dictionaries	7	5.8
Both of them with the same frequency	31	25.6

Table 8. Students' application of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in each skill

Skills	Monolingual dictionaries		Bilingual dictionaries		Both	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
Reading	46	38	54	44.6	21	17.4
Speaking	36	29.8	67	55.4	18	14.9
Listening	41	33.9	54	44.6	26	21.5
Writing	38	31.4	62	51.2	21	17.4
Translation	24	19.8	70	57.9	27	22.3

As previously indicated, almost all the surveyed students assessed online dictionaries rather than paper dictionaries for their study, so accordingly, findings in this research were about digital aspects of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. The results showed that google translation turned out to be the most predominant dictionary among the participants, followed by TFLAT dictionary which was in form of the downloaded version in their smartphone devices. Apart from options suggested by the researcher about bilingual dictionaries, some participants added Duolingo, Pro-Dict as their commonly used dictionaries (Table 9). When it comes to English-English dictionaries, oxford dictionary was used the most religiously among the participants, while Cambridge dictionary and vocabulary were ranked at the second and third priorities respectively among the students (Table 9).

Table 9. Students' preferable monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Dictionaries	Names	Frequency	% of cases
Bilingual dictionaries	www.dict.laban.vn	4	3.3
	www.tratu.soha.vn	13	10.7
	Google Translation	100	82.6
	www.vdict.com	0	0
	www.vi.glosbe.com	7	5.8
	TFLAT dictionary (software)	82	67.8
	Lạc Việt dictionary (software)	4	3.3
Monolingual dictionaries	www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com	99	81.8
	www.dictionary.cambridge.org	75	62
	www.macmillandictionary.com	2	1.7
	www.merriam-webster.com	0	0
	www.ldoceonline.com	1	0.8
	www.urbandictionary.com	8	6.6
	http://www.thesaurus.com	4	3.3
	https://www.vocabulary.com/	25	19.8

The study also dug deeper into the participants' perspectives toward downsides and strengths of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. The study found out that the participants were aware of benefits of monolingual dictionaries in helping them thinking in the target language ($M=3.67$), thus believing the monolingual dictionaries were great sources for their learning ($M=3.74$). Despite agreeing that monolingual dictionaries have clear word definitions ($M=3.56$), the participants indicated that monolingual dictionaries confused them in understanding word definitions as they had to guess the word meanings ($M=3.54$). However, the participants came undecided about the ideas that monolingual dictionaries are easy to use ($M=3.3$) and difficult to understand word definitions ($M=3.42$).

The results revealed that aspects of bilingual dictionaries in assisting learning English received positive thoughts from the participants. More specifically, they agreed that bilingual dictionaries are quick to find word meanings ($M=3.83$), therefore helping them to save time ($M=3.79$). More importantly, the participants expressed agreement toward the advantage of bilingual dictionaries in helping them to understand things well in Vietnamese ($M=3.77$), but they clearly understood that using bilingual dictionaries might hinder them from thinking in English ($M=3.71$).

Table 10. Students' perceptions toward advantages and disadvantages of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Monolingual dictionaries....	Mean	SD
are easy to use	3.30	1.005
are helpful for thinking in English	3.67	.995
are better options for learning a foreign language	3.74	.890
have clear definitions	3.56	.855
are difficult to understand vocabulary definitions	3.42	.990
confuse me as I have to guess the word meanings	3.54	.922
Bilingual dictionaries....	Mean	SD
help me understand things well in my first language	3.77	.947
are very quick for searching word meanings	3.83	.937
are time saving	3.79	.887
discourage me from thinking in English/L2	3.71	.779

It was worth to notice that in spite of favoring bilingual dictionaries, the participants were undecided whether bilingual dictionaries are better than monolingual ones ($M=3.36$), however, they expressed that in some aspects bilingual dictionaries are better than monolingual, which was in line with the previous finding about some advantages of bilingual dictionaries over monolingual dictionaries. Noticeably, the students agreed that English majors should use monolingual dictionaries more often than bilingual dictionaries ($M=3.59$) and combine both kinds of the dictionaries when learning ($M=3.72$).

Table 11. Students' attitudes towards comparison of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Item	Mean	SD
Bilingual dictionaries are better than monolingual dictionaries.	3.36	.806
In some respects, bilingual dictionaries are better than monolingual dictionaries.	3.64	.742
It would be best to combine monolingual and bilingual dictionaries	3.72	.839
English majors should use monolingual dictionaries more often than bilingual ones	3.59	.901

V. Conclusion

The findings of this research did throw light on UPT English majors' actual practices and perceptions towards monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. With regard to the students' actual practice of dictionary usage, the results found that the major students of UPT had the habits of using dictionaries on a daily basis despite varied frequency among individuals. When it comes their purposes of using dictionaries, it was not surprising to find that checking meaning was the top priority, followed by checking pronunciation, synonyms, antonyms and word spellings, which was in line with findings of some previously implemented research. It was also worth noticing that the students concerned themselves about checking singular and plural forms when using dictionaries. To accomplish the purposes of utilizing dictionaries, the students employed a variety of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, with the former being oxford dictionary and the latter being Google translation representing the most popular ones among other dictionaries.

Regarding the students' perceptions of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, the findings of this research were in line with some previously conducted studies on the same issue. Particularly, the surveyed participants were more in favor of bilingual dictionaries rather than monolingual dictionaries because of some positive aspects related to saving time in searching and grasping more clearly word meanings. However, it does not mean that the students believed bilingual dictionaries are better than monolingual dictionaries. In fact, as revealed by the findings, the participants believed that monolingual dictionaries presented great merits of giving clear definitions and encouraging them to think in English; they therefore pinpointed that there should be a combination of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries when learning English. In order to fully exploit the benefits brought by dictionaries, it is suggested that learners should use the two kinds of dictionaries simultaneously to secure the reliability and accuracy of that word as according to Laufer (1997), bilingual dictionaries are not always trustworthy despite being used often by a majority of learners. As a results, using monolingual dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries concurrently will eliminate the chances of causing confusion and ambiguity of word meanings. Moreover, using merely bilingual dictionaries might hamper learners from thinking in the target language since learners have the tendency to understand L2 vocabulary by translating in L1. Therefore, monolingual dictionaries should be encouraged to be used more often among UPT students as monolingual dictionaries are better in providing definitions as well as other language aspects. Additionally, monolingual dictionaries can help to boost learners' fluency since word meanings are explained in contexts compared to giving just word translation equivalents of bilingual dictionaries. When using monolingual dictionaries for looking up word meanings, it is advised that learners need to scan all the given definitions in the entry before concluding the final choice.

Given that the suggestion of employing monolingual and bilingual dictionaries synchronously, teachers could be a source of help in aiding the learners to maximize the benefits and minimize the drawbacks of the two kinds of dictionaries. To this end, teachers could demonstrate benefits of using the two kinds of dictionaries in class when it comes to checking words meanings or other aspects of words. As for the learners themselves, forming a habit of using monolingual dictionaries more frequently to boost their language proficiency since they will have to think more in the target language is advisable. There were several limitations in this research investigation, and the results obtained should be evaluated within these limitations. One of the limitations of the study was the small sample size; therefore, generalization of the results in other contexts should be considered. Further research should employ larger sample size to accomplish more justifiable findings. Additionally, it should also be noticeable that the study also limited itself to the investigation of the perception of English majors only. Further studies may concern investigation the use of online dictionaries among English learners in general.

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