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Dictionary Using Habits of Electrical Engineering Students in Lahore, Pakistan

Anjum Naseem Rao

Abstract

The modern day dictionaries, particularly the EFL learner dictionaries, have improved enormously on their micro-macro and super structure, yet the potential users of these kinds of dictionaries are not fully aware of this comprehensive improvement. As a result, the wealth of information, both linguistic and encyclopedic goes unheeded by the potential learners. The main cause of all this is attributed to the lack of requisite reference skill (Dictionary using skills) by the learners. The aim of this study is to find out the extent to which the students of electrical engineering at UMT possess the necessary reference skills to be able to use the EFL learner dictionaries efficiently in situations of linguistic and pragmatic failure. The research methodology used in this investigation is eclectic drawing on the essential principles of both qualitative and quantitative approaches for a comprehensive understanding of the situation under investigation. As many as one hundred students were selected randomly for this study. The findings of the pilot study suggest that most of the students lack the necessary dictionary using skills to make the most of the information provided in the dictionary which, of course, underscores the need to teach the students on how to use the dictionary, the kind of dictionary most suitable for them and integrating the dictionary with the language class. Such a measure is

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expected to improve the linguistic and communicative competence of the learners and will make them confident and self reliant in their study.

1. Introduction

Dictionaries are usually consulted to find meanings, definitions, grammatical descriptions and pronunciations of words. Sometimes they help to identify the origin or root of the words, the usage and collocation. Many of the dictionaries add certain pages about the use of dictionary, maps, general information such as countries and their capitals, currencies, conversion tables, explanation of common symbols and peculiar information about geography, culture, politics and history of European countries, especially the UK or the USA. It is believed that dictionary teaches the learners what is strange and unfamiliar to them; improves the vague impression of the learners towards certain words or phrases and enables them to use these words or phrases appropriately. There is hardly any language learner who can deny the importance and necessity of the dictionary.

This paper highlights the insufficient dictionary use in classrooms especially while teaching communication skills. It throws light on how dictionary use can be made effective in the classrooms and why students find it hard to polish their referencing skills. Dictionary Based Teaching and providing visual images to students for some ethnic, cultural and social words and phrases are better than sticking to traditional dictionary use and the creative way of dictionary use can be applied in EFL and ESL classes. The researcher also recommends adding dictionary based activities to each class. Dictionaries can be consulted during warm up exercise or icebreaker.

1.1 Purpose of a dictionary

A dictionary used by students is usually for explanation of a word or getting meaning of it. Dictionary use is included in referencing skills that have great contributions in study skills and learning and teaching a foreign language. It is a sad fact that dictionary using trend has been affected within the last decade. Internet, mobiles and top of that lack of encouragement from the teacher's side have given a downturn to dictionary use. This paper propounds that habits of dictionary use can be revived if the teachers incorporate dictionary based activities in their lesson plans as well as classroom teaching.

1.2 Background and literature review

Spelling mistakes, errors in pronunciation and knowing the meaning of unfamiliar word or its unfamiliar use cause the dilemma of an EFL speaker and writer. Communicative method that has become popular during the course of twentieth century, advocates spoken English as the first and

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the foremost goal of an L2 learner. But Vivian Cook writes in the introductory chapter of her book that spoken mode of a language cannot be preferred over written mode. As in speaking we do not need to tell spellings but while writing, one has to be conscious of spelling mistakes. It is true that spelling mistakes alone can be rectified by stressing on dictionary use in class rooms. She also stresses the fact that in L2 language leaning written language cannot be ignored.

Electrical Engineering students are basically science students and they are far away from learning language sophisticatedly. Their subjects and educational domain are mechanical and technical. Their teachers also emphasize on communication skills by improving their presentational skills. They also lack necessary referencing skills. Even they do not know which dictionary will serve their study needs. Baxter says “choosing the most appropriate dictionary for students is a recurrent problem” (Baxter, 1980). Not knowing the exact translation of a particular word can lead to unnecessary repetition and confusion. The genesis of this problem lies in lack of adequate referencing skills. Baxter elaborates the point that “a man who uses a great many words to express his meanings is like a bad workman who instead of aiming a single stone at an object takes up a handful and throws at it in hopes he may hit it.” If the appropriate use of dictionary is a great skill, the inappropriate dictionary use is great deficiency. In second language acquisition, the English language learners often use the dictionaries which confuse the students particularly the *polysemy* nature of words, a word having multiple meanings. They also show anxiety when they have to consult a homonym word which spellings they are not sure of.

Dictionary use offers numerous benefits to its users. While looking up for a particular word in dictionary the student comes across many new words and happens to know them just by chance. Jan. H. Hulstijn Merel Hollender and Tine Greidanus in their article ‘ incidental vocabulary learning by advanced foreign language students ; the influence of Marginal Glosses, Dictionary use and Reoccurrence of unknown words’ express that “it is a generally accepted principle that extensive L2 reading is good for vocabulary acquisition.(Brown , 1994, Chap 16, Grabe 1991; nation 1990; Swaffar Arens, & Byrnes, 1991)”. Reading according to most researchers leads to L1 Vocabulary growth.

1.3 Aim of the study

Referencing skills are part and parcel of study skills of university students. There is a growing trend in universities to include dictionary using skill as part of study skills, note taking and intensive reading. Dictionaries can lead to enormous vocabulary growth in L2 learners. Main aim of this study is to find out the use of dictionary by students. The study is limited to address the following research questions.

1.4 Research question

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1. Do the students use dictionaries outside and inside classroom?
2. Are they familiar and self efficacious in using dictionaries for grasping meaning or pronunciation?

2. Methodology

The method of study is quantitative as well as qualitative. A questionnaire that comprised of 21 questions was conducted among 100 selected students of Electrical Engineering at UMT, Lahore, Punjab.

2.1 Population and sample

The population and sample of study is mentioned below:

A questionnaire is administered through 100 students who were randomly selected from electrical engineering department at UMT, Lahore. All of them participated in filling up the questionnaire about dictionary use. Likert scale was used in questionnaire in measuring student's responses on a continuum of five degrees. Questions were asked to know students' habits of using dictionary as well as their proficiency. Based on their responses, the researcher suggests the ways to improve the existing situation.

2.2. The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed by the researcher. It has 21 questions. Questions deal with students' referencing skills, knowing the pronunciation, stress pattern from dictionary, use of dictionaries inside and outside classrooms, effectiveness of pictorial, online and mobile and bilingual dictionaries.

2.3 Data analysis

Age graph of sample population indicates that the selected university students participated in the research. 87 percent of them are pursuing a B.Sc. degree. While asked how do they understand the meaning of a word. 100 percent people said they used a dictionary and use of internet was the second best choice selected by them. 96 % people agreed that they preferred using an online dictionary because of its omnipresence in computer lab. Since all the students belong to engineering group, they rely on technology more than a printed book that is hard to carry.

Dictionary preferences show a very striking result. 100 percent students agreed that they used dictionaries of other languages to understand English. It implies that students find it very comfortable to access bilingual dictionaries. Similarly 98% percent students have also agreed that they prefer to use English to English dictionaries. It clearly shows that consultation of

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dictionary only occurs when the students do not understand a word and it does not matter for engineering students whether it is necessarily a bilingual dictionary or a monolingual dictionary.

Dictionary has a strong link with learning new words; students' responses show a huge discrepancy over this issue. 37 % of them strongly agree that their classroom assignments forced them to consult a dictionary. 33% agreed that they also consulted dictionaries while making assignments. Only 14 % students said that they didn't consult dictionaries while conducting assignments. Many students appreciated the use of dictionaries by saying that they made their course content easier. English language assignments mostly demand use of dictionaries. 61% people agreed that dictionaries help in getting the assignments done.

3 . Results and Findings

These results have been extracted from SPSS data tables. Student's responses have been written against each statement. Complete research questionnaire and data tables have been given in the annexure.

Sr. No	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1.	Many of your assignments in English language class forced you to use dictionary.	37 %	33%		16%	13 %
2.	While learning English language dictionaries are useful.	37%	43%		14%	
3.	Dictionaries are extremely helpful in understanding the course content.		27%	37%	18%	
4.	Dictionaries also help in getting English assignments done.		32%	29%	21%	15%

5. You like to use picture dictionaries. 9% 2%	25%	41%	23%	
6. Pictures help you, while learning nouns. 2%	29%	39%	23%	7%
7. Pictorial dictionary explains meanings 1%	36 %	36%	21%	6%
better than simple dictionary.				
8. Online dictionaries give sufficient 9% 0%	35%	39%	17%	
information regarding any expression.				
9. While studying, you use Google or Yahoo 6% 0%	38%	42%		14%
for searching meaning of difficult words.				
10. You think you feel difficulty in understanding 18% 6%	18%	36%		22%
terms/ meanings in a bilingual dictionary. e.g: Urdu to English or vice versa.				
11. Dictionaries should be made available 7%	27%	31%	20%	15%
in classrooms for the students to use extensively during lessons.				
12. You feel any problems of comprehension of 14% 4%	18%	36%		28%
meaning while consulting any dictionary.				
13. You frequently seek help in learning 1%	19%	33%	33%	14%
pronunciation of an unusual word.				

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14. You learn stress pattern from dictionary. 22% 31% 24% 19%
4%

1. More than half of the population agrees that the assignments lead them to the use of dictionary. Since all the students belong to the same class, so their response implies that there is a relationship between the assignments and the use of dictionary but a significant portion of the class has not developed the habit of dictionary use or at least fails to find the relationship between their assignments and the dictionary use.
2. About 70% students believe that dictionaries help them while learning English language though the degree of their conviction varies. There is just 6% of the population that observes poor relationship between the language learning and dictionary use. The students who have shown neutral response in this regard refer to the poor training of dictionary use or their ignorance regarding the role of dictionary in the acquisition of language.
3. Majority of the students finds the dictionary extremely useful in understanding of the course content but their response varies between strong agreement and disagreement. Perhaps the word 'extremely' in the question causes this variation.
4. The response of the fourth query is interesting. In the first query, the 70% population finds the relationship between the assignments and the dictionary use but here the percentage decreases to 61% who gets the dictionary help while doing their assignments. This shows the lethargic behaviour of comparatively a small group that knows the relationship between assignments and the dictionary use but does not practice it adequately.
5. One may call it a strange response of Electrical Engineering class that they find picture dictionaries useful and they like to use such dictionaries. At mature level, the explanatory or descriptive dictionaries are considered more useful than pictorial ones but the labeling habit of engineering students may find it more convenient to use pictorial dictionaries.
6. The response of sixth and seventh queries in the line of fifth query. The students like picture dictionaries and a large number of them find these dictionaries helpful in acquiring nouns and they think pictorial explanation is easier than explanatory one. Probably the second language learners face certain barriers in the use of monolingual dictionary. Sometimes they search the meaning of a word or phrase in the monolingual dictionary and they come across another unfamiliar word or its unfamiliar use. In such a situation picture dictionaries help them and they do not indulge in any sort of anxiety.
7. An overwhelming majority agrees that the online dictionaries give sufficient information regarding any unfamiliar expression. It shows that they are more inclined to the use of online dictionaries. If the learners are not technological handicapped and they have access to the latest versions of authentic online dictionaries, they save their time and learn

a lot. The engineering students are supposed to be connected with the online dictionaries and they rightly are.

8. About 80% respondents believe that they get help of search engines such as Google or Yahoo to locate the meanings of the words that seem them difficult. That is an encouraging sign which reflects the students' learning passion. However, it is not clear whether they use these search engines after consulting the authentic and comprehensive dictionaries or they rely more on these search engines rather than the online dictionaries of Oxford, Cambridge, Encarta, etc.
9. More than fifty percent of the students face difficulty if they consult bilingual dictionary and experience a sort of strangeness even in their first language particularly in searching the Urdu equivalents of English terms.
10. The respondents look aware of the importance of dictionary and their majority is favouring the idea of the availability of dictionaries in the classrooms. Perhaps the extensive use of dictionary in the classroom has divided the opinion of the respondents.
11. The majority of the respondents complain the problem of comprehension in searching the meanings into the dictionary. This complaint may be one of the constraints of ESL learners who have limited vocabulary and familiarity with a few structures.
12. The students' attitude towards the pronunciation learning does not depend on the dictionary use only. Perhaps they rely on the pronunciation of their instructor or other means of imitation and accurate pronunciation. As compared to those who seek help of dictionaries for meanings the number of dictionary users for learning pronunciation is low.

Discussion

Role and importance of dictionary can't be denied in the global scenario of language teaching. We can't stop relying on them rather we must find suitable ways to reconnect with dictionaries as it is clear from the findings that students are more prone to use internet and mobile dictionaries. It's high time to incorporate them in our teaching. As language teachers it's our responsibility to keep ourselves updated with the new trends and also facilitate the need of students.

It is very much evident that students lack necessary reference skills. They have succumbed to easy practices of using mobile phone dictionaries and goggling meanings. Now it's the role of the teacher to establish a link between classroom and home assignments with the use of dictionaries. In this way students can be self sufficient in learning language. Deficiency of self efficaciousness in the use of dictionaries makes students lethargic as well as incompetent in language learning. Dictionaries help in vocabulary building and their regular use is highly required at this stage.

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The research also highlights that not only the meaning but also the pronunciation can be learnt from dictionary. But students least consulted a dictionary for learning pronunciation. Likewise, they also don't know that stress pattern can be learnt from dictionary. The researcher recommends that stress pattern and pronunciation exercises and activities should also be incorporated in curriculum. Training sessions of dictionary use must be an important part of teaching English.

Conclusion

The researcher concludes with a two pronged conclusion. On one side, it emphasizes the use of dictionary by making it a compulsory tool and a compendium to language. On the other side, it links visual, explanatory and detailed demonstrations by language teachers to address the social aspect of language and cultural gaps. It also emphasizes that digital dictionaries as well as internet dictionaries can address the academic needs of EFL students. Moreover, referencing skills should be made compulsory for EFL students. It includes learning definitions from dictionaries, learning and improving pronunciation, decoding and all the things related to their use. The paper has brought to limelight the dilemma of EFL students. It is also notable that estrangement of students from dictionaries can lead to deficiency in language learning. Dictionaries are not as much used as they are supposed to be in and out of the classroom.

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