EXPLORING THE DICTIONARY PREFERENCES OF PROSPECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT
Dictionaries are among the most commonly employed materials in the foreign language learning process. Different types of them like monolingual, bilingual, collocation, and thesaurus dictionaries in both printed and electronic forms are at the disposal of learners to help them with lexical problems. As each type holds different characteristics, the dictionary use patterns are shaped in accordance with the specific needs and expectations of learners. This study aims to find out some details on prospective English language teachers’ dictionary preferences during their struggle to develop foreign language skills. The study was conducted with the participation of 55 freshman students taking the “Word Skills Course” in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Program at Ondokuz Mayıs University. The data were collected through a written questionnaire which consists of five multiple choice and six short open-ended questions. The findings yielded by the numerical and qualitative analyses indicate that all of the participants somehow utilize dictionaries (an average possession of 2 printed dictionaries per student) and think that dictionary use is an indispensable part of language learning. However, they are not entirely sure of whether they employ dictionaries effectively or not. Almost half of the participants (42%) think that they cannot use dictionaries effectively. As for the dictionary types, the majority of the participants (58%) prefer printed monolingual dictionaries. In the light of the findings we suggest that ELT students’ awareness and knowledge as to the available different types of dictionaries should be raised through informative elaborations on their distinguishing functions; and their skills for the effective use of dictionaries should be consolidated through regular instructor-guided practices on dictionary use within and outside the classroom.

Key Words: dictionary, English language teaching program, effective use, monolingual, bilingual

1. INTRODUCTION

English holds a lingua franca status all around the world and it is therefore the most prioritized foreign language in Turkey as well as in most other countries. As a result, there is a considerable number of active ELT programmes at Turkish universities that aim to educate the prospective English language teachers for the national educational system. Even though those who attend such ELT programmes hold a certain level of readiness in terms of English language skills, dictionaries are still an indispensable tool and assistant for them throughout their undergraduate study. As a matter of fact, it is not correct to ignore the role of dictionaries in the studies of language learners at every level ranging from beginner to
advanced. Even native speakers do feel the need to have a look at dictionaries from time to time as it is impossible to know every single lexical item in a language even for native speakers. According to Decarrico (2001: 285) "vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign." Therefore it can be directly said that the use of dictionaries that are the foremost resource in terms of vocabulary is sine-qua-non at every phase of language learning for all kinds of learners. Supporting this specific point, Kirkness (2004: 54) states "the dictionary has long been and still is — an essential source, if not indeed the principal source, of information on language for all members of literate societies who might have questions on any aspect of the form, meaning, and/or use of a word or words in their own or in another language."

According to Zgusta (1971: 197), "a dictionary is a systematically arranged list of socialized linguistic forms compiled from the speech habits of a given speech community and commented upon in such a way that the qualified reader understands the meaning of each separate form, and is informed of the relevant facts concerning the function of that form in its community." Oxford Dictionary gives a broader definition of the word dictionary as follows: "A book or electronic resource that lists the words of a language (typically in alphabetical order) and gives their meaning, or gives the equivalent words in a different language, often also providing information about pronunciation, origin, and usage" (http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dictionary). As the definition makes it clear dictionaries do not possess a standard and uniform format. There are different types of dictionaries according to different variables. Singh (1982) introduces six criteria for the classification of dictionaries as (1) density of entries (general or special dictionaries), (2) the number of languages involved (monolingual, bilingual, bilingualized, or multilingual dictionaries), (3) the nature of entries (lexical or encyclopaedic dictionaries), (4) axis of time (diachronic or synchronic dictionaries), (5) arrangement of entries (alphabetical, semantic, or causal dictionaries), (6) purpose (normative or referential dictionaries), and (7) the prospective user (dictionaries for general users or special users). The classification of dictionaries is not merely restricted to these criteria. For instance, the dichotomy of electronic (online or offline) and printed dictionaries constitute another important dimension in the taxonomy today.

The crucial role of dictionary use in language learning process has hitherto been emphasized in a number of studies (e.g. Bensoussan, Sim, & Weiss, 1984; Laufer, 1990; Luppescu & Day, 1993; Tseng, 2009; Ezza & Saadeh, 2011; Şevik, 2014). Likewise, Asher (1999: 66) regards the use of dictionaries as a "gateway to independent learning." At this point, the role of dictionary use in raising learner autonomy is highlighted. In addition, Oxford (1990) lists using dictionaries under cognitive language learning strategies. Supporting the point underlined by Asher (1999) and Oxford (1990), Wang (2007: 15) states that "dictionaries for a foreign language learner are just maps in a tourist's hand. A language learner has to know how to use a dictionary..." All these researchers agree on the conclusion that dictionaries constitute an integral part of each language learning process and orient learners to develop their lexical competence with their guiding function.

As for the studies conducted on the use of dictionaries in EFL/ESL contexts, that of Tomaszczyk (1979) can be regarded as one of the first ones. His study aimed to find out some details as to the ways learners use dictionaries. Under the study a 57-item questionnaire was administered to 449 subjects who were composed of foreign language learners at tertiary
level, foreign language instructors, and translators in Poland. The analysis of the responses showed that the participants used dictionaries mostly for translation, then for writing and reading, and less frequently for speaking and listening. Another finding of the study was that, regardless of their language proficiency, the participants used bilingual dictionaries more than monolingual ones. The study also revealed that the subjects referred to dictionaries to look for meanings (85%), synonyms (74%), idioms (72%), spelling (72%), pronunciation (65%), grammar (59%), taboo words (45%), and etymology (19%).

Inspired by the pioneering study of Tomaszczyn (1979), Bejoint (1981) conducted a study on the use of monolingual English dictionaries with the participation of 122 French students of English at the University of Lyon. The findings of the study revealed that 96% of the students possessed a monolingual dictionary (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 45%; Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 27%; and Concise Oxford Dictionary, 85%). The findings also show that the participants utilized dictionaries for decoding more than encoding and looked for meaning (87%), syntax (53%), synonyms (52%), spelling and pronunciation (25%), and etymology (5%).

Other than the above-mentioned early two studies, researchers have conducted different studies with different contexts so far. Most of these studies put a considerable focus on the type of the dictionary used by language learners. Unlike Bejoint (1981) who believed that EFL learners used monolingual dictionaries more than bilingual ones, the majority of the researchers stated that language learners preferred to use bilingual dictionaries more (Baxter, 1980; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2003; Hamouda, 2013; Ryu, 2006; Ali, 2012). In their highly comprehensive study on dictionary usage by over 1,100 learners of English in seven European countries Atkins and Knowles (1990) found that the majority of the participants (75%) preferred to use bilingual dictionaries. Nation (2003) explains the greater preference for bilingual dictionaries with the justification that learners need to know at least 2,000 words in English in order to be able to use a monolingual dictionary properly. On the other hand, the study of Hayati (2006) on the effects of using monolingual and bilingual dictionaries yields the result that dictionary type does not have any significant effect on learners' vocabulary recall and retention.

Concerning the famous dichotomy of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, Atkins (1985:22) metaphorically states that "Monolinguals are good for you (like whole meal bread and green vegetables); bilinguals (like alcohol, sugar and fatty foods) are not, though you may like them better." What Atkins (1985) emphasizes here is the superiority of monolingual dictionaries over bilingual ones in terms of potential contributions to the learners. However, as the above-cited studies clearly display EFL learners generally tend to prefer bilingual dictionaries more. Actually, a compromise can be achieved here through a hybrid type: bilingualized dictionaries. The findings of the study carried out by Laufer and Hadar (1997) suggest that bilingualized dictionaries appear to be the most effective of the three types. Monolingual dictionaries offer a detailed coverage of lexical items with information concerning meaning in English, synonym and antonym, phonetic description, grammar tips, and contextual examples. On the other hand, bilingual dictionaries generally cover just a list of Turkish equivalents of the English lexical items. Bilingualized dictionaries cover a mix of the features of these two types. Nevertheless, bilingualized dictionaries are not so common within Turkish EFL context. The existing ones like Mirable are limited in terms of scope and coverage, therefore they are not a strong alternative for Turkish learners of English, advanced ones in particular.
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With the constant development of educational technologies, electronic dictionaries are gaining a broader place and threatening the rule of printed paperback and hardcover dictionaries. Studies of Bower and McMillan (2006), Chatzidimou (2007), Boonmoh (2010), Zarei and Gujjar (2012), Dashtestani (2013), and Şevik (2014) are among the ones putting emphasis on the increasing popularity of electronic dictionaries among EFL/ESL learners. In his experimental study Weschler (2000) found that the students could look up words with an electronic dictionary about 23% faster than with a printed dictionary. Thus, both the charm of digital devices and look-up times can be an important motivating factor for today’s digital native learners of English.

Besides the selection of the correct type, the effective use of dictionaries is another important aspect involved in discovering details concerning unknown lexical items. Possessing a quality dictionary does not necessarily mean that the user will find what s/he exactly looks for. Lack of knowledge on how to utilize dictionary entries correctly can be misleading for the learners and may result in incorrect uses of the words. Under this framework, Law (2009: 14) says “the dictionary use process is actually very complex, involving different levels of physical and mental operations, which also vary depending on the kinds of dictionary, and the purpose of its use.” Likewise, according to Horsfall (1997:7), “one of the most useful dictionary skills is to know when not to use a dictionary.” There are several studies in which the researchers conclude that a considerable number of second/foreign language learners cannot use dictionaries effectively enough (Chan, 2005; Tseng, 2009; Ali, 2012; Şevik, 2014). In their study with 89 EFL/ESL students Nesi and Haill (2002: 282) divide look-up problems encountered during the use of paper dictionaries while doing reading assignments into five categories:

1. The subject chose the wrong dictionary entry or sub-entry (34 cases).
2. The subject chose the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry but misinterpreted the information it contained (11 cases).
3. The subject chose the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry, but did not realize that the word had a slightly different (often figurative) meaning in context (7 cases).
4. The subject found the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry, but rejected it as inappropriate in context (5 cases).
5. The word or appropriate word meaning was not in any of the dictionaries the subject consulted (8 cases).

Considering the significance of the issue for English language learning process and the considerable lack of research on details as to the use of dictionaries within the EFL context in Turkey, this study concentrates on the dictionary aspect on the side of learners and aims to find out some details on the dictionary preferences of ELT students and their opinions regarding the issue. The research questions of the study are:

1. How many printed English-related dictionaries do the ELT freshmen have individually?
2. Where do they consult dictionaries more? At school or home?
3. What type of dictionary do they use more and why?
4. Do they think dictionaries are necessary in language learning?
5. Do they think they know how to use dictionaries effectively?

2. METHOD

This study is a descriptive one and has been conducted with the voluntary participation of 55 freshman students taking the “Word Skills Course” in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Programme at Ondokuz Mayis University. The data were collected through a written questionnaire which consists of eleven questions, five multiple choice and six short open-ended. The tentative form of the questionnaire was broached to several ELT experts to ensure its face validity and its final form was employed under this study upon the completion of the suggested changes.

The collected quantitative data were analyzed numerically through Microsoft Excel. On the other hand, the gathered qualitative data were first evaluated carefully and then categorized. After the categorization the data were quantitized and treated as quantitative data. The graphical analysis of the participants’ answers to some of the items in the questionnaire are presented in pie chart format under the following title. The parts without graphical illustrations are presented with percentages and discussed in written format.

3. FINDINGS

In this part, findings yielded by the quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted on the collected data are covered. The discussion of the analyses is presented with reference to the research questions of the study.

Research Question 1: How many printed English-related dictionaries do the ELT freshmen have individually?

In order to find an answer to the 1st research question of this study, we asked the participants how many printed English-related dictionaries they possessed. This question is quite important to get a clear picture of the students’ dictionary possession. The numerical analysis of the responses suggests an average of 2 printed dictionaries per student. The study of Ryu (2006) conducted with the participation of 181 freshmen from different majors who were taking the same general English classes at the University of Seoul yielded the finding that nearly 90% of the participants owned at least one printed English dictionary. The subject group of this current study is composed of ELT freshmen, therefore it is quite expected for them to have a higher average number of printed dictionaries when compared with the subject group of Ryu’s (2006) study. Actually, this average could be higher; however the ever-increasing popularity of electronic dictionaries among students should not be disregarded.

Research Question 2: “Where do they consult dictionaries more? At school or home?”

In order to find an answer to the 2nd research question of this study, we asked the participants where they consulted dictionaries more, at school or at home. Graph 1 illustrates the analysis of the relevant answers.
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Graph 1. Analysis of the responses for the question "Where do you consult dictionaries more? At school or home?"

Graph 1 clearly shows that the participants make use of dictionaries more at home (73%). This finding establishes a strong link between dictionary use and learner autonomy. Its contributions to the students’ English-related studies or assignments at home reminds us of Asher’s (1999: 66) statement that the use of dictionaries constitutes a "gateway to independent learning." At school the students have the opportunity to ask their teachers for the unknown lexical items; however, at home they depend far more on their dictionaries to handle their problems with vocabulary.

Research Question 3: What types of dictionary do they use more and why?

In order to find an answer to the 3rd research question of this study, we asked the participants a series of related questions. First, they were asked which one of the following they used more: (a) monolingual (English-English) dictionaries (printed version); (b) monolingual (English-English) dictionaries (online version); (c) bilingual (English-Turkish, Turkish-English) dictionaries (printed version); (d) bilingual (English-Turkish, Turkish-English) dictionaries (online version). The related graph based on the participants’ responses is presented below:

Graph 2. The participants’ preference among monolingual (printed-online) and bilingual (printed-online) dictionaries

Graph 2 obviously indicates that the majority of the participants (58%) prefer to use printed monolingual dictionaries. It is followed by online bilingual dictionaries (22%), printed
bilingual dictionaries (13%), and online monolingual dictionaries (7%). This finding is quite interesting in that it does not agree with most of the related findings reported in literature (Baxter, 1980; Atkins and Knowles, 1990; Schmitt, 1997; Nation, 2003; Hamouda, 2013; Ryu, 2006; Ali, 2012). On the other hand, it goes hand in hand with Bejoint’s (1981) strong emphasis on the use of monolingual dictionaries for EFL learners. This finding may also be a result of the fact that all of the 55 participants were ELT freshmen taking the “Word Skills Course.” The content of this course and its dense focus on the details of lexical items can form an orienting factor for students to refer more to monolingual dictionaries. Interestingly, while most of the students use printed monolingual dictionaries, the lowest percentage goes to the use of online monolingual dictionaries. On the other hand, the online use of bilingual dictionaries (22%) turns out to be more than printed use of bilingual dictionaries (13%).

Second, we asked the students why they preferred the dictionary type they had selected in the previous question. The qualitative analysis of the participants’ answers indicate that the monolingual dictionaries are preferred thanks to their coverage of context, detailed explanations and examples, and phonetic transcription. Bilingual dictionaries are mostly selected because they enable quick understanding through direct Turkish or English equivalents and do not require a certain level of English to understand the definitions or explanations (see Nation, 2003). Printed dictionaries are reported to be superior with the tactile aspect which contributes to longer retention. Lastly, those who preferred online dictionaries praised this type for its time-saving, easy-quick, and easily portable nature, and its coverage of listening application.

Third, with two closely interlinked questions we asked the students whether they used online and offline electronic dictionaries. The analysis of the answers shows that all of the participants (100%) reported that they somehow used online dictionaries. However, while 20 participants (36%) said that they made use of offline electronic dictionaries, 35 of them (64%) reported no use. The 100% use of online dictionaries overlaps with the the emphasis put on electronic dictionaries by Bower and McMillan (2006), Chatzidimou (2007), Boonmoh (2010), Zarei and Gujjar (2012), Dashtestani (2013), Şevik (2014), and Weschler (2000). However, the online dimension comes to the fore at this point. The participants display an evident preference for online electronic dictionaries over offline ones, which indicates the mounting role of internet technologies in language learning.

In another related question we asked the students which online monolingual dictionary they used most. This question aims to provide a broader look at the online dimension. The analysis of the participants’ responses is illustrated in Graph 3 below:

Graph 3. The online monolingual dictionary preferences of the participants
Graph 3 clearly demonstrates that the majority of the participants (69%) opt for Oxford online monolingual dictionary followed by The Free Dictionary (11%), Merriam-Webster (6%), Longman (5%), Collins (5%), and Babylon (4%). It is a well-known fact that printed Oxford dictionaries are the favourite among most EFL learners (Bejoint, 1981) and this specific finding shows that not only its printed version but also the online version keeps a high level of popularity among the participants.

In the subsequent question we asked the students which online bilingual dictionary they used most. As is the case with the previous question, this question also aims to bring a more detailed look at the online dimension. The analysis of the participants’ answers is illustrated in Graph 4 below:

Graph 4. The online bilingual dictionary preferences of the participants

It is clear from Graph 4 that Tureng (69%) is by far the most preferred online bilingual dictionary followed by Seslisözlük (15%), Zargan (9%), Babylon (5%), and Google Translate (2%). With its mobile applications and ever-growing database, Tureng (Turkish-English) online dictionary is a really rich resource for Turkish EFL learners. Google Translate cannot be deemed as an online dictionary indeed; however one of the participants regarded and reported it as so due to its bilingual nature.
In the last sub-question under the 3rd research question, we asked the students which of the following they used more: general-purpose dictionaries or specific-purpose dictionaries. The related graph is as follows:

Graph 5. Analysis of the responses for the question "Which of the following do you use more? General-purpose dictionaries or specific-purpose dictionaries?"

Graph 5 makes it obvious that the overwhelming majority of the participants use general-purpose dictionaries more than specific-purpose ones like idiom, collocation, thesaurus dictionaries. Indeed, this high percentage in favour of general-purpose dictionaries suggests a hint of lack of knowledge on the coverage and benefits of specific-purpose dictionaries. The freshman students may not know what a collocation or thesaurus dictionary is for. Accordingly, some effort should be exerted by the instructors to raise the awareness and knowledge of students on how to make use of such specific-purpose dictionaries.

Research Question 4: Do they think dictionaries are necessary in language learning?

In order to find an answer to the 4th research question of this study, we asked the participants whether they regarded dictionaries as necessary in language learning process. This question aims to touch on the meta-cognitive dimension as to the use of dictionaries. The related graph is presented below:

Graph 6. Analysis of the responses for the question “Do you think dictionaries are necessary in language learning?”
It is crystal clear from Graph 6 that all of the participants (100%) regard the use of dictionaries as a sine-qua-non of the foreign language learning process. This is actually something predictable when we consider what the literature says (Bensoussan, Sim, & Weiss, 1984; Laufer, 1990; Luppescu & Day, 1993; Tseng, 2009; Ezza & Saadeh, 2011; Şevik, 2014). This high level of awareness of the importance of dictionary use among the students adds a big plus on their language learning score card.

Research Question 5: Do they think they know how to use dictionaries effectively?

In order to find an answer to the 5th research question of this study, we asked the participants whether they knew how to use dictionaries effectively. Like the 4th research question, this also aims to offer a meta-cognitive picture of the issue. The related graph is presented below:

Graph 7. Analysis of the responses for the question “Do you think you know how to use dictionaries effectively?”

Graph 7 demonstrates that 58% of the participants think that they know how to use dictionaries effectively, but the remaining 42% think that they do not. The percentages turn out to be relatively close to one another. The number of those who give a negative answer to this question is remarkable enough. Similarly, according to the results yielded by the study of Şevik (2014) 51% of the respondents think that they can use dictionaries effectively while the other 49% think they cannot or are undecided. In addition they are other studies which report more negative results concerning the effective use of dictionaries by EFL learners (Nesi and Haill, 2002; Chan, 2005; Tseng, 2009; Ali, 2012; Şevik, 2014). Thus, it becomes clear that students need a well-structured training on how to use different types of dictionaries effectively. This is especially important for the subject group of this study who are prospective English language teachers.
4. CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of dictionaries for EFL learners, little research on English dictionaries and dictionary use has been carried out in Turkey so far (see Şevik, 2014). According to Atkins and Varantola (1997:1) "There are two direct routes to more effective dictionary use: the first is to radically improve the dictionary; the second is to radically improve the users. If we are to do either of these things – and obviously we should try to do both – the sine-qua-non of any action is a very detailed knowledge of how people use dictionaries at present." Therefore, it is fairly important to know what are the learners' dictionary preferences and whether they can use dictionaries effectively enough.

In this study we aimed to find out some details about the dictionary preferences of prospective English language teachers under the framework of "Word Skills Course" in the English Language Teaching (ELT) Program at Ondokuz Mayıs University. The data were gathered through a written questionnaire which was administered to 55 freshman students. The findings yielded by the analyses show that all of the participants somehow utilize dictionaries and hold the view that dictionaries form an integral part of the language learning process. The majority of the participants (58%) reported that they preferred to use printed monolingual dictionaries more than other types. Nevertheless, 42% of the participants think that they cannot use dictionaries effectively. Taking these findings into consideration, we suggest that, as prospective English language teachers, ELT students' awareness and knowledge on the effective use of dictionaries should be raised as much as possible through regular authentic practices and tasks within and outside the classroom. Their look-up errors should be minimized through instructor-guided practices and assignments. Last but not least, they should be encouraged to deem different types of dictionaries as an easily-accessible and invaluable assistant for their whole English language learning process.

REFERENCES


