

Why the English Monolingual Dictionary is Under-utilised among Students

Amerrudin Abd. Manan

Language Academy, University Technology Malaysia, International Campus, Jalan Semarak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: amerrudin@ic.utm.my

Khairi Obaid Al-Zubaidi

Language Academy, University Technology Malaysia, International Campus, Jalan Semarak, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
Email: drkhairi@ic.utm.my

Abstract—This paper mainly investigated English Monolingual Dictionary (EMD) use among second year students of Universiti Teknologi Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (UTMKL) International Campus. The researchers wanted to discover the students' habit and attitude in EMD use; their knowledge with regard to the language learning resources available in EMD; their skill in using EMD, and finally, to discover whether they received any formal instruction in EMD use when they were studying in their former schools and tertiary education. A total of 169 students took part in the survey by answering a questionnaire. The results of the study suggest that the respondents were poor users of EMD. They rarely consulted the EMD; their knowledge of the language learning resources in the EMD was limited; most perceived their EMD skill as average, and there was no instruction in EMD when they were at tertiary education and previously when they were at school.

Index Terms—English monolingual dictionary (EMD), habit, skill, attitude, vocabulary

I. INTRODUCTION

The English monolingual dictionary (EMD) is an important tool for learning the English language. From the EMD, students can learn many aspects of the English language, for example, meaning of words and phrases, pronunciation, word stress, spelling, words' part of speech, the use of target words in context, etc. As in the words of Berwick and Horsfall (1996), when used appropriately, the EMD can be a valuable learning resource for the ESL/EFL learners.

The EMD is particularly important for ESL/EFL students, because being in a non-native environment, ignorance and uncertainties about the correct meaning of words, pronunciation, stress and how target words are actually used in context, for example, are common. As students cannot always ask their teachers on those aspects of language they wish to learn, and as there is constantly the absence of a correct model to follow, the EMD can help. The EMD can therefore help them to assume some degree of independence in learning the English language.

Though few would argue against the importance of the EMD in helping students to have some degree of independence in learning English, we still do not know much about how it is being perceived and used by students. We are still not clear about students' knowledge of the EMD as a language learning tool, their skills in using EMD and their attitude towards EMD in language learning. According to Winkler (2001) and Hartman and James (1998), we still do not know much about the behaviour and preferences of dictionary users and the complex operations involved in dictionary consultations. Brumfit (1985) argues that dictionary use is quite often taken for granted and under-utilised. Tickoo (1989) maintains that the EMD is a rich learning resource, but it has been poorly used. Insufficient assistance given to students to optimise the use of EMD, he says, is the reason why students fail to exploit the immense information available in the dictionary.

Some research related to this study reveals the different behavior of students with regard to dictionary use. Sanchez (2005) reported that her research subjects used bilingual English-Spanish dictionary to look for equivalent terms, spelling and examples of words used. When looking up definitions of words and also spelling, her subjects would consult the EMD. Concerning difficulties in dictionary use, Sanchez reported that the problems her subjects mentioned when looking up words in the EMD include not finding words they looked for, difficulty to find the specific information they were looking for and inability to understand meaning of words. According to Sanchez, her subjects attributed the reasons for the difficulties to their lack of familiarity with the dictionary, lack of dictionary skills and unclear layout of the dictionary. Her study also indicated that the majority of them had not been taught how to use dictionaries.

Battenburg (1989) listed the information his research subjects would look up for when consulting the EMD. These include spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech and syntactic patterns, definitions, etymology, illustrations, derived forms, synonyms, cross references, usage labels, pictures and diagrams. Battenburg also reported that when the advanced, the intermediate and the elementary subjects were asked if they were ever taught how to use a dictionary in English class, half of the students from the elementary and advanced group said that they had not received such

instruction. The majority of the intermediate subjects said that they had received such instruction only because one ESL instructor had included the instruction in the curriculum for one of the academic terms.

Nesi and Hail (2002) looked at the problems which students faced when looking up words in the dictionary. Their subjects were asked to report on the way they had consulted their dictionaries based on 89 assignments given to them over a period of three years. Their study found that while the majority of the words were looked up successfully, more than half of their subjects were unsuccessful in at least one of five dictionary consultations. Of particular difficulty to the subjects was in selecting appropriate entries and sub-entries in their dictionaries and there were also some serious errors in entry interpretation which their subjects were not aware of.

Diab and Hamdan (1999) reported the findings of a case study which investigated how 50 Jordanian Arab university students of English interacted with words and dictionaries while reading a specialised text in linguistics. The results of their study showed that meaning and pronunciation were the prime purposes of dictionary use. It was also found that the overwhelming majority of the dictionary look-ups were not preceded by any pre-dictionary use strategy, suggesting that there was no instruction in dictionary use for the students. The study also showed that EMDs were used more frequently used than bilingual ones, and that they were also found to be more useful than the latter.

Winkler (2001) carried out a study to investigate the problems EFL learners encountered when using an Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, Fifth Edition, in book form and on CD-ROM. In the course of completing a writing task by her student participants who participated in her research, they had to seek assistance from the dictionaries above. The problems the students encountered suggest a lack of dictionary-using skills in certain areas. Some of the participants were not aware of the information that can generally be found in an English learner's dictionary. They were not only ignorant of the preliminary front pages and the appendices but also of the structure of individual entries. Even higher-level students had difficulty with scanning long entries or finding particular details and often gave up such searches.

Taylor (2004) commented that although the EMD is an essential and invaluable resource for ESL students at various levels, many of the dictionaries recommended to students were too sophisticated for students' vocabulary abilities. She was also critical of many ESL instructors who seem to have the tendency to assume that ESL students are generally equipped with the knowledge of how an EMD functions and is used. Commenting on the quality of dictionaries, in her opinion, a good EMD should contain a list of possible definitions of a word presented in order of frequency of use (most common to least common); definitions that show high levels of differentiation to enable students to become familiar with the various uses of a word in which some are polysemous; definitions which are followed by useful and clear contextual examples and finally entries that present multiple pieces of information in a clear, organised and non-intimidating manner for the user.

Petrylaite et al (2008) investigated 88 ESP students' use of the different types of dictionaries, the problems they encountered during dictionary consultations and the opinions they had about their own dictionary skills. Their study suggests that an overwhelming majority owned bilingual dictionaries while only a few owned EMDs. When asked about their frequency of dictionary use, more than half said they consulted the dictionary three or four times per week, and few consulted it every day. For the questions on reasons for looking up words, an overwhelming majority consulted the dictionary for meaning, followed by spelling, grammar, usage, phrasal verbs, derivatives, compounds, pronunciation, idioms, synonyms/definitions and finally, collocations respectively. For the question on the problems they encountered when looking up words in EMD, many were given, some of which were: words were not there, information needed was not given, entries which were too long and example sentences which were not helpful. The majority, however, gave definitions which were not clear as the most notorious problem. When asked for the reasons which they think caused the above difficulties, the subject responses were: lack of familiarity with the dictionary, lack of dictionary skills, unclear layout of the dictionary, difference between British and American English and too little information given in the dictionaries.

Besides investigating the effects of the use and non-use of dictionaries on their subjects' performance on EFL reading tests, Bensoussan et al (1984) also investigated students' dictionary use and preferences and their teachers' opinions of the students' dictionary use and preferences. Among others, their research suggests that less proficient students did show a greater need to use dictionaries than the better students. Whereas the better students indicated preference for EMD, the less proficient indicated their preference for bilingual dictionaries. With regard to the teachers' opinion about whether the students were effective dictionary users, they were generally critical of this, believing that the students were not, although the students thought they were effective users. Their research also suggests that less proficient students lack the language skills to benefit from the EMD, whereas more proficient students know enough to do without the EMD.

This study came about after we noticed the stark contrast in dictionary use between the local mainstream University Technology Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (UTMKL) students and foreign students who both studied at the university. From our observation after teaching the foreign students for three semesters, we saw that the foreign students from China, Iran and Iraq were frequent and avid users of the pocket electronic dictionary. The local students, however, were clearly not dependent on the dictionary. Due to the stark difference in dictionary use between the two groups of students, this study was carried out to investigate the local students' perception and use of the EMD. This research was conducted to investigate the following:

1) To discover the second year UTMKL students' habit, attitude, knowledge and skill with regard to dictionary use, especially EMD.

II. METHODOLOGY

The respondents for this study were second year students of UTMKL. They were engineering students who took the diploma programme which lasted three years and they were about 19 years old. Cumulatively, they had learned English as a second language at schools and at UTMKL for at least 12 years before taking this course. The researchers would roughly grade them as slightly below average in terms of their level of English at the British's *GCE Ordinary Level* certificate.

The researchers received assistance from their eight lecturer colleagues at the university when administering the questionnaire. It was answered during the *English for Professional Communication* class made compulsory by the university. The lecturers explained questions in the questionnaire not understood by the students. Out of the total 253 students, the researchers got back only 169 (67%) of the questionnaire due to the high rate of absenteeism on the day it was administered. Nine of the questions in the questionnaire are objective questions, and only one is subjective (see appendix 1). The questionnaire was designed to obtain data on the following domains:

- 1) to discover the students' habit and attitude with regard to dictionary use, especially EMD,
- 2) to discover their general knowledge about the language learning resources available in EMD,
- 3) to discover their skill in using the EMD and
- 4) to discover whether there was formal instructions received by them in EMD use at their school/tertiary education.

III. RESULTS

TABLE 1:
LANGUAGE MEDIUM OF DICTIONARY PREFERRED

Language Medium	Percentage
Bilingual (English-Malay/Chinese/Indian-English)	60
EMD (English-English)	12
Both	28

Table 1 illustrates the language medium of dictionaries which the respondents prefer. More than half of the respondents surveyed preferred consulting the bilingual dictionary, i.e. English-Malay/Chinese/Tamil. 28% of the respondents preferred consulting both, i.e. EMD and bilingual dictionaries, while only a small percentage (12%) preferred consulting the EMD.

TABLE 2:
FREQUENCY OF LOOK-UP FROM EMD

Frequency	Percentage
Rarely	46
3-5 times per week	22
Once a week	20
Never	10
Everyday	2

Table 2 illustrates the frequency of look-up from the EMD. The majority (46%) said they rarely look up words from the EMD while 10% said that they never consulted it.

TABLE 3:
REASONS FOR NOT LOOKING UP WORDS IN EMD

Reasons	Percentage
Hard to understand definition in dictionary	45
Other information about words in dictionary are too technical to understand	27
It takes too long to find meanings of words from the EMD	23
Others	5

Table 3 illustrates the reasons why the respondents did not have the habit of looking up words from the EMD. Nearly half of the respondents said that they did not understand the definition of words given in the EMD. 27 % said that they found some information about words in the EMD too technical to understand. 23% said that it took too long to find the meaning of words in the EMD.

TABLE 4:
RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTION OF THEIR SKILL IN USING THE EMD

Skill level	Percentage
Average	71
High	13
Low	10
Very high	4
Very low	2

Table 4 illustrates the respondents' perception of their skill in using the EMD. The majority (71%) viewed their skill as average.

TABLE 5:
RESPONDENTS' EXPERIENCE IN ATTENDING CLASSES IN WHICH EMD SKILLS WERE TAUGHT

Attendance	Percentage
No	94
Yes	6

Table 5 shows the percentage of respondents who had attended classes in which explicit EMD skills were taught. An overwhelming majority (94%) had not had any such class before.

TABLE 6:
RESPONDENTS' OWN PERCEPTION CONCERNING THE IMPORTANCE OF EMD IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

The importance of EMD	Percentage
Important	85
Not sure	13
Not important	2

Table 6 shows the respondents' own perception of the importance of EMD in language learning. The majority (85%) agreed that it was important.

TABLE 7:
RESPONDENTS' KEENNESS TO ATTEND AN EMD CLASS IF IT WAS HELD AT THE UNIVERSITY

Keenness	Percentage
Yes	47
Not sure	46
No	7

Table 7 shows the respondents' keenness in attending a special EMD class if it was held at the university. The data shows that only about half of the respondents indicated their keenness to attend, and the other half were not sure. A small percentage indicated that they were not keen in attending.

TABLE 8:
INCREASED FREQUENCY OF USE IF RESPONDENTS WERE HIGHLY SKILLED AT USING THE EMD

Increased frequency of EMD use if respondents are highly skilled	Percentage
Yes	68
Not sure	29
No	3

Table 8 shows the respondents' perception on their frequency of EMD use if they were highly skilled in using it. The majority indicated that they would use the EMD more frequently if they were good at it.

TABLE 9:
THE REASON/S FOR REFERRING TO THE EMD

Reasons	Percentage
Learn meanings of new words	79
To expand my vocabulary	34
To see how words are used in the example sentences	20
To check spelling	17
To improve my English	16
To speak better	9
To improve my writing	7
To learn grammar	7
To learn pronunciation	7
To learn synonym	6

Table 9 illustrates the reasons why they consulted the EMD. It suggests that vocabulary learning seems to be the main concern of the respondents (e.g. learning meanings of words, to expand one's vocabulary and to learn synonym) for consulting the EMD.

TABLE 10:
THE TYPE OF DICTIONARY USED BY RESPONDENTS

Dictionary type	Percentage
Desk dictionary	47
Small pocket booklet non-electronic dictionary	31
Pocket electronic dictionary	9
Online dictionary	8
Other	5

Table 10 illustrates the dictionary types which were used by the respondents. The desk dictionary (half size A4 paper) was the most popular among the respondents (47%).

IV. DISCUSSION

Only a small minority of the second year students preferred using the EMD suggesting that the majority were not comfortable with the EMD. In terms of frequency of use, most students were infrequent and some were non-users of the EMD, suggesting their poor habit in EMD use. Data suggests that this was due to several reasons: they found it hard to understand the definition of words in the EMD; they found some of the information about words in the EMD too technical to understand, and it took them too long to find the meaning of words in the EMD. The majority perceived their skill in EMD use as average. The three reasons above emerged because an overwhelming majority of the students had not had any experience of attending classes where explicit dictionary skills were taught.

Nevertheless, the respondents' indicated that they were aware of the importance of the EMD in language learning, indicating their positive attitude towards it. However, although they were mostly aware of its importance in language learning, about half of them indicated their uncertainty about attending a special class for EMD skills if it was held at the university. A possible explanation for this could be due to their worry about having to attend extra classes besides the regular classes which they already had. It might mean an added burden for the students, hence their uncertainty on this.

In terms of frequency of use, the majority of the students indicated their willingness to use it more frequently if they were skilled at using the EMD. This again indicated their positive attitude towards EMD use. The Education ministry and Malaysian universities could thus take advantage of this by introducing EMD skills in the classroom so that some degree of independence in language learning and the great potential of the EMD as a language learning resource could be fully exploited.

From the responses given by the students when they were asked to list down the reasons why they consulted the EMD, their responses suggest that their knowledge of the EMD as a language learning resource is very limited. They consulted the EMD mainly because they wanted to learn vocabulary meaning. Although there are other equally important reasons for consulting the EMD, they were very rarely or not mentioned. Aspects like pronunciation, stress, grammar, spelling, collocation, word derivatives, idiomatic expression, taboo words, slang terms, etc. were generally unfamiliar to them.

Where dictionary type is concerned, the desk dictionary (half size A4 paper) is the most popular among the students. Compared to the foreign students who seemed to be habitual users of the pocket electronic dictionary, this type of dictionary was not popular among the local students although it was available in the market.

V. CONCLUSION

This study seems to explain the problem noticed by the researchers. The local students were not dependent of the EMD not because they were very good at English, but rather because they lacked the knowledge of the linguistic resources available in the EMD, and they lacked the skills in the use of the EMD. Because EMD skills were not taught, they found the EMD too difficult for them.

It is acknowledged that some information contained in the EMD explanation may be rather technical to students. For example, they may not be able to understand the phonetic symbols or the stress mark to exploit pronunciation information from the EMD. They may not see the value of grammar labels like preposition, pronoun, un/countable, conjunction, etc. Nevertheless, the researchers believe that teachers can do a lot to change students' misperception of the EMD. The argument is that if these were taught to students, they would no longer find the EMD information too technical anymore.

On the point that they found it hard to understand the definition in the dictionary, the argument is that students should be explicitly shown that EMD tend to use the common core vocabulary. For example, Hornby's (2000) desk EMD uses the 3000 defining vocabulary definitions which are not difficult because they are highly frequent, common, everyday words. They were carefully chosen because of their high frequency in the language. If this was demonstrated and explained to students, they may be less lukewarm towards the EMD.

On the point that they were bothered when looking up words in the dictionary because it was too time-consuming, the argument is that this is possibly because of lack of practice in word searching. Patience and constant practice develop skill, and consequently, word search may not be time-consuming anymore. The foreign students did not seem

to be bothered by this, suggesting that they were more comfortable than the local students in using the dictionary due to constant practice.

With respect to the local students' preference for the bilingual dictionary, although some language teachers believe that bilingual dictionary is also a helpful vocabulary learning tool, there are language experts who think otherwise, i.e. it can encourage students to habitually resort to translation when learning the second language. Translation may slow down the process of learning L2. Using the bilingual dictionary may also encourage students to think that there is always a one-to-one correspondence between words in L2 and L1, and that it encourages direct translation. The researchers therefore believe that the use of bilingual dictionary should be minimised.

The Malaysian Education Ministry might have neglected the importance of EMD skills, and it might have assumed that students would pick up the skills by themselves even without teachers' intervention. But this study suggests the contrary. EMD skills may not be something which comes naturally and that even after reaching the university level when students should have been learning English as a second language for 12 years, many still were not able to benefit much from the EMD. This study has also indicated that because of the absence of explicit EMD teaching in class, the respondents' knowledge of the dictionary as a language learning tool is also inferior, and this may result in poor vocabulary knowledge among students.

One of the language skills that could be adversely affected by poor vocabulary knowledge (brought about by poor dictionary skill) is reading comprehension. Research has shown that poor vocabulary knowledge may result in poor reading comprehension skill (Koda, 1989; Ulijn and Strother, 1990; Beck and McKeown, 1991; Haynes and Baker, 1993; Qian, 1999). Poor reading comprehension skill may put students in the vicious circle, where poor reading comprehension results in poor vocabulary gains. English language teachers could stop this ailment by explicitly teaching EMD skills.

In terms of dictionary type, the researchers are of the opinion that pocket electronic dictionary may promote frequency in use as it is more convenient than the desk dictionary due to its portability. The desk dictionary, which the students seem to prefer, in contrast, may limit frequency of use due to its bulk. Students may not be carrying the desk dictionary around. Pocket electronic dictionary is thus recommended so that they, like the foreign students, can increase their frequency in EMD use anywhere and at anytime. The convenient pocket electronic EMD may increase students' frequency in dictionary use, and hence expand their vocabulary amount, especially when the tool is in their pocket like their mobile phones.

Although the EMD is a very useful learning tool for vocabulary and language learning, it has not been optimally tapped by schools and universities in the country. Dictionary learning in Malaysian schools has apparently been taken for granted. Hopefully this study may open the eyes of educationists in Malaysia so that EMD skill is seen as an urgent necessity. A conclusion that can be drawn from this study is that there is a likelihood that EMD teaching may be well received by university students at UTMKL and perhaps elsewhere too in the country judging from their positive attitude towards it.

EMD publishers, for their part, should also think about making the EMD more user-friendly, less technical, easy and more attractive to students. The Education Ministry who is always very concerned with the present command of Malaysian students with respect to the standard of English should start promoting the electronic EMD to increase frequency of use among students. Some mobile telephone companies which have started incorporating electronic English dictionary features in their mobile phones, though on a small scale, should perhaps expand this feature further so that students, who generally seem to adore gadgets, could use them anytime and anywhere.

APPENDIX 1

This questionnaire is about dictionary use in learning English language. It seeks to find information on your general knowledge about the dictionary, your skills in using the dictionary, your attitude towards the dictionary, and your habit with respect to dictionary use. Please respond by circling the best options and/or by writing down your answers in the blanks. Please be honest when answering the questions and answer all questions.

1. In terms of language, what kind of dictionary do you usually refer to?
 - A. bilingual (Malay, Chinese, Tamil-English or vice versa)
 - B. monolingual (English-English)
 - C. both
 - D. other (please state) _____
2. How often do you use the English monolingual dictionary?
 - A. everyday
 - B. about 3 to 5 times per week
 - C. about once a week
 - D. rarely
 - E. never
3. If you feel that you don't have the habit of looking up words in an English monolingual dictionary, why is it so?
 - A. I find it hard to understand the definition in the dictionary
 - B. It takes too long to find meaning of words

- C. I don't think finding meanings of words are important
 D. Other information about the words which I look up are too technical to understand
 E. Other (please state) _____

4. Roughly, how would you grade your current skill in using the English monolingual dictionary? (The word skill means your understanding of all or most of the information about a word contained in the dictionary. These include, e.g., your ability to understand the word meaning, the word part of speech or class, your ability to understand the example sentences, your ability to understand and use the different dictionary symbols for a word, etc.).

- A. very high B. high C. average D. low E. very low

5. Have you had any classes given by your teachers/lecturers in which English monolingual dictionary skills are taught at any time when you were at school and/or at college/university?

- A. yes B. no

6. I think the English monolingual dictionary is important to me in learning English.

- A. strongly agree B. agree C. not sure D. disagree E. strongly disagree

7. If there is a special class held for students at University Technology Malaysia to teach English monolingual dictionary skills, would you like to attend it?

- A. yes B. not sure C. no

8. If you have good knowledge about the English monolingual dictionary and good skill in using it, would you use the English monolingual dictionary more frequently?

- A. yes B. not sure C. no

9. Please write down exactly the reason/s why you refer to the English monolingual dictionary. I refer to them because I want to learn...

- a. _____
 b. _____
 c. _____
 d. _____
 e. _____
 f. _____

(You may add more reasons if you wish)

10. What kind of dictionary do you usually refer to?

- A. online dictionary
 B. pocket electronic dictionary
 C. desk dictionary (the big dictionary the size of half the A4 paper)
 D. small pocket booklet non-electronic dictionary
 E. other (please state) _____

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Amerrudin Abd. Manan obtained his PhD. from Liverpool University. He has taught at secondary schools and universities for the past 25 years. He has written articles in journals and newspapers and has presented papers at local and international conferences. His research interests are English for business/academic/occupational purposes and vocabulary studies.

Khairi Obaid Al-Zubaidi obtained his PhD. from Northern Colorado University, U.S.A. He has taught at several universities in the Middle East. He has written papers in journals and has presented papers at conferences locally and internationally. His research interests are applied linguistics, cultural studies and translation.