Activation of Using English Dictionaries by English Majors at Al-Imam University: Uses, Difficulties, and Types of Used Dictionaries

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Abstract—This study aims at activating the use of English language dictionaries by English majors at Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud University located in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. It mainly tries to find out students' skills in using dictionaries, the difficulties students encounter while using their dictionaries, and the type of the used dictionaries. The population of the study consists of all English majors at Al-Imam University, while the specific sample of the study consists of about 60 male students selected randomly out of the third and fourth- year English majors at the same university. The subjects of the study were asked to fill in a questionnaire designed by the researcher himself. This questionnaire includes about 30 items divided into three domains: dictionary uses, difficulties of using dictionaries, and the types of the used dictionaries. The gathered data were statistically analyzed, and the results were discussed and commented on. The researcher reached some conclusions and recommendations which might make the usability of the dictionaries more effective and beneficial for both teachers and students; and as a result, to facilitate the teaching/learning process of English majors at this university.

Index Terms—dictionary, skills, printed dictionaries, electronic dictionaries, strategies, monolingual dictionary, bilingual dictionary

I. INTRODUCTION

Writers and researchers have expressed several views on the importance of dictionaries as an effective tool in the teaching and learning process. These views are concerned with the reasons of using dictionaries, the difficulties students encounter while dealing with dictionaries, and the types of dictionaries used by several categories of learners.

Atkins (1997) suggests that teachers and educators should teach dictionary skills to their students if they want to be aware of what they are doing in class. Hartman (1999) has assured that dictionaries can facilitate the process of building and learning vocabulary when the user follows some strategic activities and skills. Beech (2004) points out that the developing use of a dictionary has the potential to provide self-teaching opportunities, for reading, spelling and general phonological skills.

Alkhub (1997) says that many EFL learners face some problems while looking up the target words because thay simply do not follow the proper skills. He adds that these problems result from learners' ignorance of the strategies or skills necessary for dictionary use.

Sanchez, (2005) points out that our students need instruction in dictionary skills, and they need to become familiar with electronic dictionaries in particular.

Mitchell (1983) assures that the task of finding the right meaning in the dictionary entails a complex set of processes, with potential obstacles for users at every stage. He also emphasizes these two points:

1. Our students need instruction in dictionary skills.
2. Our students need to become familiar with electronic dictionaries.

Myers (1994) has discussed the problems learners encounter when using the bilingual dictionary such as finding culture-specific expressions, technical language, abbreviations, idioms and proper nouns. She recommends that teachers should be aware of these difficulties and help their students to overcome them.

Neubach, Abigail & Cohen, Andrew D. (1988) talk about some problems related to dictionaries such as the technical problems regarding the lay out of dictionaries. They say that the size of print and the format of the display were constraining factors-i.e., small letters, crowding print and a lack of adequate sequence between the definition and the example.

Koren (1997) says that the electronic dictionary requires different skills or habits than those required by the printed dictionaries. These skills do not take long time to master such as the skill of seeing buttons without having to search.

Thus, there is no doubt that the most important resource students should have for learning English is their dictionary. There are many students and teachers who can not benefit from learning how to use dictionary effectively. By exploiting dictionaries as a source of interaction, we can surely help students develop their confidence as dictionary users and as language learners.

Location of the Study

This study was administered in the College of Languages and Translation at Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud University located in Riyadh, the capital of Saudi Arabia. This university is one of the biggest and prominent universities in Saudi Arabia. The population of this university is more than 25,000 Saudi students who join this university for graduate and postgraduate Studies. There are hundreds of foreign students who join this university to study Islamic religion and Arabic language. Al-Imam University teaches several human, applied, medical, admin, and religious majors. It has got several branches in big Saudi cities as well as intermediate and secondary Islamic institutes in major cities of Saudi Arabia, Ras al-Khaimah, the USA, Indonesia, Malaysia, Djibouti and Japan.

Statement of the Problem

English staff members in the College of Languages and Translation at Al-Imam University have noticed that students in this college are unskillful in using their dictionaries and, they are always in need of training on how to use these dictionaries effectively. Students usually face several challenges while looking up their dictionaries, and they find it difficult to decide the most effective and appropriate type of dictionaries to use while studying. Consequently, the researcher has decided to conduct this study to investigate all these important issue.

The Significance of the Study

The important of this study stems from the necessity of developing Saudi English majors' skills in using English dictionaries while studying English language. This study is expected to investigate the dictionary skills which Saudi English majors are really in need of while using their dictionaries and the types of dictionaries they mostly use. In addition, it tries to explore the difficulties students encounter while using their dictionaries. The researcher thinks it is important to conduct the present study so as to achieve the previous objectives and to reach conclusions and to suggest educational implications which may help both Saudi English language instructors and learners.

The Objectives of the Study

This study aims at investigating the skills students are in need of while learning English, the dictionary difficulties they encounter, and the types of dictionaries these students mainly use. To be more specific, this study aims at:

1. revealing the types of information Al-Imam University English majors look up when they consult their dictionaries.
2. finding out the problems Saudi English majors encounter while using their dictionaries.
3. finding out the types of dictionaries Saudi English majors mostly use (printed, electronic, bilingual, monolingual)

The Questions of the Study

1. What skills do Al- Imam University English majors use while dealing with dictionaries?
2. What dictionary skills should be emphasized or given more attention by Al- Imam University English majors?
3. Which dictionaries are mostly used by English majors: printed, electronic, bilingual, monolingual?
4. What challenges face Al-Imam University English majors while using their dictionaries?
5. Are there any significant differences between the means of the responses of the third and fourth English majors?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Chen (2008) compared the effects of using different types of printed dictionaries on non-English major learners' academic performance in vocabulary acquisition, retention, and reading comprehension. The sample of the study consisted of 273 participants who were selected from six English classes in three departments in a private two-year collage in southern Taiwan. These subjects were divided into two groups according to the dictionary used: monolingual and bilingual. This study comprised five vocabulary acquisition tests, reading comprehension pretest and posttest, two retention tests, and the pre and post language attitude questionnaire. The results showed that the bilingual dictionary users outperformed monolingual dictionary users in vocabulary acquisition and retention tests. However, reading comprehension post test performance was not influenced by the type of the dictionary used. The findings also revealed that implementing dictionary skills in both groups improved participants' English learning attitudes after the experiment.

East (2005) conducted a study to investigate how dictionary availability impacts on exanimation performance as measured, for example, by test scores or by the quality of test-takers responses. The sample of the study consisted of 47 students from eleven schools in the Auckland and Northland and regions of New Zealand who were being prepared for New Zealand's year 13 external exanimation in its last year of operation (2003). The findings highlighted the training issues to be considered when helping students to prepare for a second language examination that allows the use of dictionaries, particularly bilingual ones.

Huagn (2003) investigated Taiwanese university English majors' dictionary beliefs, their dictionary use strategies, the relationship between their dictionary beliefs and strategies, the effect of English proficiency on dictionary beliefs and strategies, and the relationship among these learning variables. The sample of the study consisted of 414 Taiwanese university English majors who completed survey instruments developed for this study. Moreover, interviews were concluded with six proficient and six less proficient English students. The results of this study suggested a positive perspective on dictionary use in foreign language learning than typical use . Understanding students' dictionary beliefs and used strategies may also enable EFL teachers to help students develop effective learning strategies and ultimately improve their English abilities.

Hsien (2001) conducted a study to find out the effects of dictionary use on the vocabulary learning strategies used by intermediate collage level Spanish learners to understand vocabulary items in a reading test. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups: control (without a dictionary), bilingual dictionary (using a Spanish-English dictionary),

or monolingual dictionary (using a Spanish-only dictionary). A text appropriate for the students' level served as the reading passage. Students' responses on the vocabulary learning strategies were collected from a questionnaire distributed to them. Results indicated that when a dictionary was available, students tended to consult it rather than guessing the meaning from context. Learners in the bilingual dictionary group tended to consult their dictionary more than those using a monolingual dictionary.

Al-khub (1997) conducted a study to find the types of information EFL learners look up in their dictionaries, the types of dictionaries they use and the problems they encounter when they consult their dictionaries. The sample of the study consisted of 212 subjects from Yarmouk University English sophomores and juniors and 88 from field teachers. The researcher has developed a questionnaire for this purpose. The results indicated that the majority used bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. It also indicated that students encountered three problems when they consulted their dictionaries: the spelling of words, the confusion of information given in the dictionary, and the inadequacy of the illustrations of the examples given in their dictionaries.

Bishop (1998) investigated how high school and collage second-language learners used bilingual dictionaries. Surveys examined how well students knew their bilingual dictionaries, how they used them, and how much they thought about what were doing before reaching for the dictionary. Results indicated that students used the dictionaries extensively as sources of grammatical information, not just for meaning.

In conclusion, the previous review of related literature (theoretical and practical) has obviously assured the importance and strong influence of activating the use of dictionaries so as to facilitate the learning process of English as a foreign language. To the best knowledge of the researcher, no studies have been conducted in Saudi Arabia to investigate the influence of the effective use of dictionaries, the types of dictionaries used and the difficulties Saudi English majors encounter while using these dictionaries. Therefore, this study is an attempt to investigate the issues mentioned above and to reach educational implications and conclusions which may pave the way towards training Saudi English majors on the effective skills of using different types of dictionaries and employing them effectively while learning and studying English language.

III. METHODOLOGY

Design of the Study

The researcher designed a questionnaire to ask English majors about the uses, the difficulties they face while using dictionaries, and the types of dictionaries they frequently use. The gathered data were statistically analyzed and commented on; and as a result, important educational conclusions are expected to be reached.

Sample of the Study

The specific sample of the study consists of about 60 students randomly selected from the third and fourth- year English majors studying in the College of Languages and Translation at Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud University during the academic year 2010/2011. The sample is intentionally selected from the third and fourth- year English majors only because most major English courses of literature, linguistics and translation are taught during these two years. Students in Saudi Arabia learn English at government schools starting the fifth grade at the age of 11. Therefore, most of Saudi English majors suffer a lot while studying English as a foreign language since they were not exposed to enough English language learning experiences at school. During the first year and a part of the second year in the college of Languages and Translation, they study preparatory courses which are mostly taught in Arabic. Dictionaries are not really needed a lot during this period of time. The real need for dictionaries seriously emerges during the third and fourth years.

Instrument of the Study

The major instrument for this study was a questionnaire which consisted of about 30 items. This questionnaire was divided into three domains: the uses, the difficulties, and the types of the used dictionaries. After achieving the validity and reliability, the questionnaire was completed by the subjects of the sample.

Definition of Terms

Dictionary: A dictionary is an alphabetical book that provides users with various kinds of information about lexical items.

Printed Dictionaries: Dictionaries that are produced on paper or another material using a machine.

Electronic Dictionaries: Dictionaries which depends on a system of operation that involves the control of a flow of electrons.

Bilingual dictionary: A book that lists the words alphabetically in one language and gives their equivalents in the other language.

Monolingual dictionary: A book which includes words within one language giving the meanings and other kinds of information of these lexical items.

Skills: Systematic steps followed to achieve certain goals or to solve certain problems.

EFL: This refers to English taught as a foreign language in countries that have no native speakers of English.

English Major Students: This refers to students who study English language and literature in the College of Languages and Translation at Imam University.

IV. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The required statistical analyses have been done so as to answer the questions of the study. Here are the obtained results.

Q1: What skills do Al-lmam University English majors mostly use while dealing with dictionaries?

To answer this question, means and standard deviations of the uses of dictionaries were obtained. Table (1) shows the results.

TABLE (1)
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE USES OF DICTIONARIES

No	item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S.D
11	To find the stylistic value of a word (colloquial, standard, slang.etc.)	1	5	2.02	1.11
9	To find out what certain abbreviations stand for.	1	5	2.60	1.12
5	To find if verbs are transitive or intransitive.	1	5	2.65	1.23
8	To find out the origin of certain words.	1	5	2.65	1.19
15	To find how to beak a word into syllables.	1	5	2.72	1.12
7	To look for inflection or derived forms of words.	1	5	2.73	1.26
10	To find out synonyms and antonyms of words.	1	5	2.73	1.29
14	To find out the meanings of prefixes and suffixes.	1	5	2.88	1.15
6	To find out the irregular plurals of some nouns.	1	5	2.92	1.21
4	To find out what parts of speech of words are.	1	5	2.93	1.19
12	To find out the equivalent proverbs in English or in Arabic.	1	5	3.00	1.25
13	To learn from the given written example sentences.	1	5	3.43	1.16
2	To find how to pronounce words.	1	5	3.47	1.19
3	To check the spelling of words.	1	5	3.70	1.21
1	To find the meanings of word.	2	5	4.18	0.91

Table (1) shows that the means range between (2.02-4.18). The highest mean (4.18) is for item (1) "To find the meanings of words". Item (3) "To check the spelling of words" scored the second rank with a mean of (3.70). Item (11) "To find the stylistic value of a word (colloquial, standard, slang.etc." scored the lowest rank with a mean of (2.02).

Q2: What dictionary skills should be emphasized or given more attention by Al-lmam University English majors?

To answer this question and to find out the skills which should be emphasized and given more attention by Al-lmam University English majors, means and standard deviations were obtained. Table (1) also shows the results. Item (11)" To find the stylistic value of a word(colloquial, standard, slang.etc.)" scored (2.02), then item (9)" To find out what certain abbreviations stand for " scored (2.60), and then item (5)" To find if verbs are transitive or intransitive " scored (2.65).

Q3: Which dictionaries are mostly used by English majors: printed, electronic, bilingual, monolingual?

To answer this question, means and standard deviations of the used dictionaries were obtained. Table (2) shows the results.

TABLE (2):
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS OF THE USED DICTIONARIES

No	item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S.D
1	I tend to use paper dictionaries.	1	5	3.07	1.21
2	I tend to use electronic dictionaries.	1	5	4.28	0.99
3	I tend to use bilingual dictionaries.	1	5	3.33	1.30
4	I tend to use monolingual dictionaries.	1	5	3.10	1.37

Table (2) shows that the obtained means range between (3.07 – 4.28). Item (2)" I tend to use electronic dictionaries " scored the highest rank with a mean of (4.28), then item (3)" I tend to use bilingual dictionaries " scored the second rank with a mean of (3.33), then item (1)" I tend to use monolingual dictionaries " scored the lowest rank with a mean of (3.33).

Q4: What challenges face Al-lmam University English majors using their dictionaries?

To answer this question, a sample t-test for the difficulties of using dictionaries was applied. Table (3) shows the results.

TABLE (3)
MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR THE DIFFICULTIES OF USING DICTIONARIES

No	item	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	S.D	T	Sig.
11	I find it difficult to master English idioms.	1	5	3.27	1.04	1.99	0.05
8	I find it difficult to distinguish grammatical terms.	1	5	3.25	1.10	1.76	0.08
10	I find it difficult to determine the standard pronunciation.	1	5	3.23	0.98	1.84	0.07
7	I mix words which are spelled differently.	1	5	3.18	1.07	1.33	0.19
5	I lack the skills of using dictionaries.	1	5	3.17	1.09	1.18	0.24
9	I find it difficult to read phonetic script.	1	5	3.17	1.06	1.22	0.23
2	I find it difficult to make sense of this entry.	1	5	3.13	1.08	0.96	0.34

3	I find it difficult to determine the intended meaning of the target word.	1	5	3.13	1.10	0.94	0.35
1	I find it difficult to determine the suitable entry.	1	5	3.12	1.08	0.84	0.40
6	I find it difficult to understand the given illustrations or examples.	1	5	3.00	1.13	0.00	1.00
4	I do not know the arrangement of English alphabets.	1	5	2.32	1.38	-3.82	0.00

Table (3) shows that the most difficult challenges faced by Al-lmam University English majors while using their dictionaries is " the arrangement of English alphabets" whose T .value reached (-3.82), which is significant at level (α=0.05), then "difficult to understand the given illustrations or examples." whose T .value reached (0.00) which is not significant at level (α=0.05).

Q5: Are there any significant differences between the means of the responses of the third and fourth English majors?

To answer this question, independent sample T-Tests of the three domains (uses of dictionaries, difficulties of using dictionaries, and the types of used dictionaries) with reference to the responses of the third and fourth-year English majors were applied. Table (4) shows the obtained results.

TABLE 4:
RESULTS OF T-TEST FOR THE TYPES OF USED DICTIONARIES BY FOURTH AND THIRD -YEAR ENGLISH MAJORS

Domain	Group	Mean	S.D	T	Sig.
Uses of dictionaries	Third	2.96	0.55	-0.15	0.88
	Fourth	2.99	0.72		
Difficulties of using dictionaries	Third	3.30	0.56	2.64	0.01
	Fourth	2.88	0.68		
Types of dictionaries	Third	3.51	0.54	0.75	0.46
	Fourth	3.38	0.74		

Table (4) shows that there are significant differences in the "Difficulties of using dictionaries" in favor of the third-year English majors, but there are no significant differences between the responses of the third and fourth-year English majors in the other two domains.

V. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Concerning the first question of the study about the skills which Al-Imam University English majors mostly use while dealing with dictionaries, the results indicate that item (1) "To find the meanings of words" and item (3) " to check the spelling of words" scored the highest two ranks on the questionnaire, while item (11) " to find the stylistic value of a word (colloquial, standard, slang..etc." scored the lowest rank on the questionnaire.

This result shows that students are mostly concerned with two types of information when they consult their dictionaries: finding the meanings of words and checking the spelling of these words. Of course, since students study English as a foreign language, they always find difficulty in guessing the meanings of words and in spelling them correctly. Dictionaries are originally designed to help EFL learners to achieve these two purposes. As for the other look-ups, they received less interest. Students were interested in finding the stylistic of words since they rarely need to find.

With regard to the second question of the study about the dictionary skills which should be emphasized or given more attention, item (11) "to find the stylistic value of a word (colloquial, standard, slang..etc." and item (9) "to find out what certain abbreviations stand for" scored the lowest ranks on the given questionnaire. This result is attributed to the fact that TEFL learners are rarely in need of such types of information. When they are in need of such information, they find it easier to ask their English instructors. I think that by time, students will be more self-dependent on mastering such dictionary skills since most of them tend to buy dictionaries, or they tend to use online ones.

With respect to the third question of the study about the types of dictionaries which are mostly used by English majors, the results indicated that electronic dictionaries scored the highest rank on the distributed questionnaire, while monolingual dictionaries scored the lowest rank. Of course these results seem natural since electronic dictionaries are easier and faster to use, and they do not depend on alphabets which many students do not learn them by heart. English majors also find bilingual dictionaries easier and more practical to decide the exact meanings of words since some of them get mixed up with the given entries of monolingual dictionaries which sometimes make students unable to decide the correct entry.

Concerning the fourth question about the challenges which face Al-Imam University English majors, the findings indicated that students find difficulty in the arrangement of English alphabets while using their dictionaries. They also find it difficult to understand the given instructions or examples. To understand why students face difficulties in the arrangement of alphabets, I can say that students learned English alphabets in their elementary classes at school. After that, they haven't had enough chances to practice arranging these alphabets. Therefore, it is natural to forget the arrangement of these alphabets and consequently they find it difficult to use their paper dictionaries since their entries are arranged alphabetically.

The difficulties students face in understanding illustrations or examples given in their dictionaries could be attributed to the fact that these students are not competent enough to understand such illustrations and examples and to decide the

most appropriate ones for their needs. This means that students have to practice using dictionaries though giving them enough chances to acquire the needed skills.

Concerning the fifth question about whether there are significant differences between the means of the responses of the third and fourth –year English majors, the results indicated that there were no significant differences between the two groups in relation to the uses of dictionaries and the types of dictionaries they use, while they indicated significant differences between the two groups (fourth and third-year English majors) in relation to the difficulties they face while using their dictionaries in favor of the fourth-year group. To justify this result, it is natural that the fourth-year students encounter fewer difficulties in using their dictionaries since they are more experienced in dealing with dictionaries, and their English competency is supposed to be better than their counterparts in the third year-level. Fourth-year students have been given more chances to deal with dictionaries and to master skills and to handle any difficulties they encounter.

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The following conclusions and recommendations can be drawn from this study:

- Dictionaries can be very beneficial for students in all language skills. Therefore, special efforts should be made to enhance this role.

-Students should be given enough chances to learn dictionary skills with the help of their instructors. Special courses could be held to achieve this purpose.

-Instructors should encourage their students to use their dictionaries in class and at home by giving them tasks and exercises related to many types of dictionary skills.

- Students need training to master the required skills for using dictionaries.

- Students need special instruction to get enough chances to practice using electronic dictionaries in particular.

- More studies are recommended to investigate the strategies students at different levels follow to look up the information they need in their dictionaries.

APPENDIX A DICTIONARIES' USE ACTIVATION

Dear Student,
Read each item carefully and place the check (√) in the column that seems most appropriate for you.

DOMAIN ONE:
USES OF DICTIONARIES

Item	Always	Usually	Often	Rarely	Never
1. to find the meanings of words					
2. to find how to pronounce words					
3. to check the spelling of words					
4. to find out what parts of speech of words are.					
5. to find if verbs are transitive or intransitive					
6. to find out the irregular plurals of some nouns.					
7. to look for inflection or derived forms of words.					
8. to find out the origin of certain words					
9. to find out what certain abbreviations stand for.					
10 to find out synonyms and antonyms of words					
11. to find the stylistic value of a word (colloquial, standard, slang..etc.)					
12. to find out the equivalent proverbs in English or in Arabic					
13. to learn from the given written example sentences.					
14. to find out the meanings of prefixes and suffixes.					
15. to find how to break a word into syllables.					

DOMAIN TWO:
DIFFICULTIES OF USING DICTIONARIES

Item	Always	Usually	Often	Rarely	Never
16. I find it difficult to determine the suitable entry.					
17. I find it difficult to make sense of this entry.					
18. I find it difficult to determine the intended meaning of the target word.					
19. I do not know the arrangement of English alphabets.					
20. I lack the skills of using dictionaries.					
21. 1 find it difficult to understand the given illustrations or examples					
22. I mix words which are spelled differently.					
23. I find it difficult to distinguish grammatical terms.					
24. I find it difficult to read phonetic script.					
25. I find it difficult to determine the standard pronunciation.					
26. I find it difficult to master English idioms.					

DOMAIN THREE:
TYPES OF USED DICTIONARIES

Item	Always	Usually	Often	Rarely	Never
27. I tend to use paper dictionaries.					
28. I tend to use electronic dictionaries.					
29. I tend to use bilingual dictionaries.					
30. I tend to use monolingual dictionaries.					

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