The Role of Meaning Access Devices in Dictionary Use

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the findings of a study aiming to investigate the effectiveness of help-devices in learners’ deciphering of meaning of English words among 232 Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) undergraduates in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). It focuses on investigating the learners’ perspectives on dictionary use including their awareness and realization of the importance of using dictionary to look up the most appropriate meaning of multi-sense words. It also examines the effective role the meaning access device like menu system plays in helping learners easily look up the appropriate sense of a multi-sense-word in English. To collect the required data, the study made use of a questionnaire and two Word Sense Identification Tests (WoSIT). Findings indicated that the participants seemed to be less aware of the importance of meaning access devices in deciphering the meanings of words in English. It was also found that the use of menu as meaning access devices is useful in helping the participants look up the most appropriate meaning of a multi-sense word in English.

Keywords: Access device, dictionary, English vocabulary, ESL Learners, help-devices, menu system, semantic information, signposts

INTRODUCTION

A dictionary is not just another book. In order to be able to read this special book and use it effectively, users need certain skills defined by Hartmann and James (1998, p. 117) in their “Dictionary of Lexicography” as “the abilities required for finding the information being sought”. If used appropriately, the dictionary can be a valuable tool for learners of a foreign language; without proper skills, however, the dictionary can be as much of a hindrance as help (Berwick & Horsfall, 2000). It seems, however, that many language learners lack appropriate
skills and, moreover, hardly receive any
dictionary training (Tono, 1992; Wright,
1998).
Learners mostly persist on using
bilingual or semi-bilingual dictionaries
when encountering a new word or when they
wish to find out more details of a familiar
word. These types of dictionaries do not
usually offer that quality of information
presented in the learners’ monolingual
dictionaries. However, the need for students
to make use of monolingual dictionaries
comes from the fact that these kind of
dictionaries inculcates the habit of thinking
in the target language and hereby saving a
great amount of time and energy on the part
of the users when they resort to translating
from target language into their mother
tongue (Scholfield, 1982).
In order to take the full advantage
of all types of dictionaries, learners need
many skills such as fluency in the target
language, alphabetical order, awareness
of the headwords, and knowledge of basic
word lists which are used for defining new
words.
The learners also need to know how
words are organized in the dictionary. Most
dictionaries make different lists of parts
of speech and each one is defined in their
appropriate positions, while others (e.g.,
COBUILD) lump various parts of speech
in one list, giving all the information in one
place.
However, locating the accurate meaning
of a word with multiple related senses
efficiently in terms of shorter look up time
still remains a challenge for a substantial
number of second language learners of
English, particularly in the use of learner
dictionaries (Nesi & Tan, 2011). This
could be due to the fact that learners
tend to look up the meaning of a word
with various senses without trying to
conceptualize the meaning of that word
in other contexts. This is possibly due to
the use of ineffective dictionaries which
lack useful help devices to access meaning.
Frequently, on occasions where learners
need to confirm the meaning of a word, it
can be misleading to immediately resort to
the direct translation of the word into the
learners’ first language before a dictionary
look up. The users’ lack of dictionary
training can also be the possible cause of
this inefficiency.
In a study by Tan (2009) which
compared efficacy between paper and
electronic dictionaries, it was observed that
dictionary users need to be given dictionary
training based on specific problems they
face. As a whole, however, the print
dictionary group had higher efficacy than
the electronic group, but there was no
discernible trend in the relationship between
its actual efficacy, and the self-perceived
efficacy for both groups. This suggests that
subjects’ perceived efficacy beliefs are not
good predictors of their performances.
In his study, Koplenig (2011) compared
print dictionaries with online dictionaries. His
findings indicated that online dictionaries
provide a number of unique possibilities
for the presentation and processing of
lexicographical information. He reasons
that when potential users are fully aware
of the advantages of possible innovative features of online dictionaries, they will rate these features as more efficient. These features include help-devices in dictionaries.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS
The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students’ experiences in using dictionaries for selecting the appropriate meaning of a word with multiple senses?

2. Is there a difference between the use of the help-devices and non-use of help devices in selecting the appropriate meaning of words with multiple senses?

3. How can the dictionary help-devices be useful for deciphering the appropriate meaning of a word with multiple senses in English?

A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK
Tono’s (1992 & 2001) work and publications have efficiently contributed to this area in deciphering the appropriate meaning of a word with multiple senses. The theoretical and conceptual framework of ideas proposed by Tono (1992 & 2001), and adopted by other researchers like Lew and Pajkowska (2007) are relevant to this current research. Some additional ideas have been adapted and added to expand the framework so that it can suit the purpose of the current study. The ideas are conceptual ways and approaches to overcome the problems encountered by learners like Japanese and Polish users, while using dictionaries to find out the most appropriate meaning of a word having various senses. These ideas are further and clearly highlighted by Lew and Pajkowska (2007), as well as examined and tested in the current study.

The first meaning access device which is called “the menu system” is defined by Lew and Pajkowska, as “a list of senses without examples and detailed information and suggests that such a menu interface should be added at the beginning of any entry that is fairly long and complex” (2007, p. 2). The use of menu system to facilitate entry exploration and navigation was suggested by Tono (1992). Tono tested the idea on Japanese learners of English and found the menu helpful in assisting the process of sense selection for learners at the level of junior high school, but observed no such effect for the more advanced group of college students.

The second help-device, known as the system of signposts, is defined as words or short phrases that distinguish the meanings of longer entries and act as a visual index to help the user access the meaning that they want as quickly as possible. The latter device is claimed to be used originally in the edition of the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE) (Lew & Pajkowska, 2007). The signpost system is based on brief sense indicators distributed across the specific senses; a distinct alternative is the entry menu. However, to make the overall framework suit the purpose of the study, the additional aspects added to the framework are learners’ experience, the use of menu device and the non-use of
help-device under the first approach which is called improvement of the entries (or the access structure) of dictionaries. All these three aspects are assumed to affect the learners’ efficacy rate of deciphering the appropriate sense of the word with multiple senses.

**METHODOLOGY**

Based on the objectives and the research questions in the current study, the qualitative methodology was employed for data collection. For the first objective concerning investigating the learners’ perspectives in dictionary use, the quantitative method was employed by administering a 4-point Likert styled questionnaire to the students. The nature of the data collected by the questionnaire was largely quantitative and complemented partly by qualitative data. For the second and the third objectives regarding the effectiveness of the use of help devices such as menu system in deciphering the appropriate meaning of a word with multiple senses, a quantitative method was used by offering the students two dictionary tests. The data collected by those tests though quantitative in nature, can elicit useful information that is more focused than an open-ended questionnaire.

**Subjects**

For data collection, 32 undergraduates majoring in TESL at UKM participated in the research. There were 29 females and 3 males. Their mother tongues were different. A majority of the undergraduates (26 of them) had Malay as their mother tongue. The rest of them had Chinese as their mother tongue. They took TESL as their major for different reasons such as improving their English, requiring English for a job and for further studies at a British university. The questionnaire developed by Winkler and Keynes (2001), “Use of English Learner’s Dictionaries”, was administered for the first test. For the second test, 200 TESL students who were in the second year of their bachelor’s with the same background at UKM answered the questions which referred to the dictionary tests. All the participants were local Malaysian students, with a majority of Malay students.

**Research Instruments**

The two main instruments used in this research are a survey questionnaire (adapted from Winkler & Keynes, 2001) and a word sense differentiation test (Nesi & Tan, 2011).

**The Use of English Learner’s Dictionaries Survey**

The questionnaire, entitled “Use of English Learner’s Dictionaries” consisted of 28 questions which contained various features about dictionary and dictionary users. It aimed at investigating the actual use of dictionaries by learners of English and their attitudes towards dictionaries in printed and electronic forms. Developed by Winkler and Keynes (2001), the questionnaire was designed to provide information about the personal details of each informant, their use of and attitudes towards paper, and computer based English dictionaries as well as the practicalities such as frequency
of consultation, dictionary training, and experience in using printed and/or electronic dictionaries.

The Word Sense Identification Tests

Two different dictionary tests were administered to 200 students. The questions of the two tests were developed by Nesi and Tan (2009) and offered online. The WoSIT consisted of five sense identification items designed to select the right sense or meaning of the underlined word in the test item. For the first test, menu was available as a help device for them to choose the correct answer. The participants were asked to select the most appropriate meanings of the words given in the test from the various meanings provided in the menu. This is a similar example of the senses of the word “top” as they depicted in the online version of Macmillan English Dictionary edition (2010).

For the second test, however, there was no help-device for the participants to use, so they had to select the answers without any dictionary help device such as menu. The participants were asked to select the most appropriate meaning of the underlined words in each of the sentences given in the two different tests. The meanings of the words were given separately in test sheets. Each student answered 5 questions twice, once with menu as a dictionary help device and once without any help devices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the three research questions, this section summarizes the results of this study obtained from the data gathered and organized in the following three sections.

The Participants’ Responses to the Questionnaire

The findings collected through the questionnaire were analyzed into various sub-categories which cover the learners’ perspectives on dictionary use in looking up the appropriate meaning of a word with various meanings. The findings revealed various thematic aspects such as the learner’s preference to use monolingual dictionaries than bilingual English Malay dictionaries. This indicates that students seem to have better perception of the effectiveness of such monolingual dictionaries in finding the correct senses of the words with multiple senses through the process seeking the meaning of L2 words using L2 definitions. The study supports the argument for the effectiveness of monolingual dictionary as pointed out and recommended by many other previous researchers such as Fan (2000), Baxter (1980) and Nation (2001). In this sense, the study confirms the findings of previous studies which argue for the effectiveness and advantages of the monolingual dictionary use in learning English especially for students at higher levels of education.

Although the participants seem to be familiar with the use of dictionaries, the findings revealed that there are still problems students encounter while using such
monolingual dictionaries. It seems useful that the study is in line with other studies by Lew (2007), Lew and Pajkowska (2007), and finally Tono (1992) in highlighting different problems which are related to the content of the dictionaries rather than the students’ lack of training and skills in using dictionaries. Problems such as lack of certain information, regarding the examples and compound words, imply that learners still do not utilize more comprehensive monolingual dictionaries. Furthermore, the findings of the study revealed that the participants in general either those trained or those who lack such training in using electronic dictionaries seem to be interested and willing to receive more training in using computerized dictionaries.

Meaning Access Devices (Menu System)

Considering the analysis of these findings, it is evident that the percentage of the scores in the test in which the participants used the menu system is doubly higher than the percentage of the scores in the second test. The indication of such a difference in the last two percentages of the scores in the two tests appears to support the second research question. In other words, the difference in the two last percentages represents the significant difference in the performance of the participants in the two tests. It seems that the use of menu system by the group of the participants in the first test helped them find the accurate meaning of the underlined words and this has been reflected by the high scores they gained in the test.

Regarding the effects of the menu system on search time, the effectiveness of the signposts in helping the participants spend less time than the other group is observed. The study, in this regard, supports similar results obtained by Lew and Pajkowska (2007). The findings of the study proved that the participants who had signposts to use were faster in looking up the meanings of words than the other group with no signposts.

Dictionary Help Devices

For the third research question, the findings of the study show that the use of menu as meaning access device is useful in looking up the appropriate meaning of a vocabulary item with different senses in English. With the use of such devices, it could be seen that the participants who were provided with menus searched more successfully. This finding suggests that the effectiveness of such help devices can be seen in helping learners accurately locate the meanings of words. It seems that the menus support learners and especially those who are poorly-skilled in using dictionaries with an effective access to search for the accurate meaning or senses of words.

In this particular aspect, the findings of the current study support the findings of some previous studies, particularly by Tono (1992 & 2001). Compared to the findings of the study conducted by Tono (1992), the results of the current study seem to be similar in the sense that the successful and accurate comprehension of the meaning from dictionaries is well achieved through the use of menu system as one of the effective help
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devices. In relation to the findings of the second study carried out by Tono (2001), the findings of the current study support the findings of this study in such a way that they indicate the effectiveness of help devices in looking up the meaning of vocabulary with various meanings in a dictionary, but there is little difference between the two studies. The difference in Tono’s (2001) study is represented by the evidence that guidewords as help devices have more effective roles in helping learners find out the semantic information in a dictionary than menus do, which is not tested by the current study since it does not aim at comparing the effectiveness of the two kinds of help devices.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of the study showed the participants’ positive perceptions in dictionary use including their awareness of the importance of its use, their obstacles and difficulties regarding the use of some dictionaries, their preference for various kinds of effective dictionaries and their interests and willingness in using dictionaries for looking up the meaning of words in English as L2. Moreover, it seems that the menu system (as one kind of help device) has been proven to be an effective tool for learners to access the meaning of words. The study has proven the effectiveness of such dictionary help devices through the comparative analysis between the final percentages of the scores achieved in the two tests: the first test was provided with help devices (menus), and the second one was not supported with such devices. Finally, it should be admitted that the study has only been concerned with these two important aspects in dictionary use. It is hoped that the study has proved clearly that more and further scientific and analytical research in dictionary use will offer more significant contributions to better understanding of the effectiveness of dictionary use in deciphering the most appropriate meaning of a word and other semantic features in second language and foreign language contexts.

It is of utmost importance to consider the occurrence of words with the respective meaning in written and spoken corpora so that they can be appropriately used. Although words are suggested to be listed according to their frequency and occurrence in certain corpora, care should be taken not to mix up different features of words. Some words may be used more frequently as concrete nouns, for example, than in the abstract forms. This is also true for other parts of speech. Therefore, it is necessary to highlight the ‘outstanding’ entries (creating signposts) to draw the users’ attention to the correct application.

It might be worthwhile to include the collocation characteristics of multi-sense words in the definition so that the users can be made aware, where they can apply the right meaning with the right collocates.

REFERENCES


