Drawing the Profile of Students of English as Dictionary Users

Abstract

Fifty freshmen students of English took part in a study in order to establish their profile as dictionary users. The respondents completed a questionnaire regarding the types of dictionaries they used, the frequency of use, the main reasons for consultation, the difficulties in the lookup process, instruction in dictionary use, etc. The analysis of data revealed that the students use monolingual dictionaries (MLDs) more frequently than bilingual dictionaries (BLDs), and that the difficulties they have in the lookup process are due to deficiencies in their dictionaries. In addition, the results provide evidence that our students do not take full advantage of their monolingual dictionaries because they hardly make use of the appendices and usage guides in them. The findings also indicate that their dictionary skills are more or less weak. Therefore, this study suggests that our students should receive more training in dictionary use so that they enhance their skills and make the most of their dictionaries.
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ملخص

يسلط هذا المقال الضوء على نتائج دراسة المغزى منها رسم ملمح طلبة اللغة الإنجليزية في ما يتعلق باستخدام القواميس. شملت الدراسة خمسين طالبا من المستوى الأول في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية و آدابها بكلية الآداب بجامعة منتوري بقسنطينة،حيث قام الطلبة بالإجابة على استبيان حول أنواع القواميس التي يستعملونها و تردد استعمالها، و الأسباب الرئيسية للبحث عن المفردات و الصعوبات التي تعتريهم أثناء عملية البحث، ...الخ. كشف تحليل النتائج أن الطلبة يستخدمون القواميس أحادية اللغة على نحو أكثر من تلك الثنائية، و أن الصعوبات التي تصادفهم أثناء عملية البحث مردها أوجه قصور في القواميس بحد ذاتها. بالإضافة إلى ذلك فإن

Introduction

Dictionaries are often considered as an essential tool in the process of foreign language (L2) learning, and are recognized as the first sources of information L2 learners refer to when they are faced with words they do not know (Songhao, [1]). However, if we want our students to be efficient users of dictionaries, we need to understand how they actually use them so that we better know their needs, identify the difficulties they have in the lookup process, and one of the major advances in lexicography in recent years has been the focus on the user perspective; the literature on lexicography now has a new trend as it has started to focus particularly on dictionary users and seeks to know who uses which dictionary, and for what purpose (Hartmann,

النتائج تقدم دليلا على أن الطلبة لا يستفيدون من قواميسهم على أكمل وجه ممكن، كونهم نادرا ما يستخدمون الملاحق و أدلة الاستعمال فيها. تشير النتائج أيضا إلى أن مهارات الطلبة في استخدام القواميس ضعيفة إلى حد ما، و من هذا المنطلق فإن هذه الدراسة تركز على ضرورة تلقي الطلبة مزيدا من التدريب على استخدام القواميس، ما من شأنه أن يعزز مهاراتهم بغية الاستفادة من القواميس على أمثل وجه.

[2]). The significance of the user perspective was highlighted by Stein [3] in the following words: "Dictionaries are obviously written for their users. We therefore need much more research on the dictionary user, his needs, his expectations, and his prejudices" (p. 4). The quotation by Stein underlines the idea that research into lexicography should include some consideration of the users for whose benefit dictionaries have been compiled.

Since dictionary use is unlikely to have been researched in the Algerian context before, we know nothing or relatively little about how language learners use dictionaries; thus, there is a call for more information about the relationship between dictionaries and L2 learners, and we can access this information only through empirical research on habits of use, needs, and different problems learners might have when consulting dictionaries. The significance of such a study is further endorsed by Hartmann's [4] belief that:

Research into dictionary use . . . provide[s] the framework for all lexicographic production, and more such research will be needed if the level of dictionary awareness is to be raised and the teaching of reference skills is to be improved. (p. 37)

The overall aim of this paper is to advance an understanding of a group of EFL Algerian freshmen students as dictionary users. Specifically, the objectives of our research were to:

1- Identify the dictionary type that is mostly used by freshmen EFL students.
2- Find out to what extent these students take advantage of their monolingual dictionaries.
3- Explore the difficulties the students have in the lookup process and the reasons for these difficulties.
4- Investigate whether the students were satisfied with the instruction in dictionary use they received.

Literature Review

Systematic research into dictionary use is relatively new and a few empirical studies can be found in this recent field of enquiry.The earliest approach to dictionary use research was the survey by questionnaire, which was pioneered by the American lexicographer Clarence Barnhart in the early 1960s (Diab&Hamdan, [5]). Barnhart's study, however, was not so authentic because it relied on second-hand opinions of college teachers; the argument is that the relationship between teachers' reports and actual dictionary use is indirect since the teachers were not involved at all in the dictionary-using act; thus, Barnhart's study has been regarded as too distant and weak to yield reliable results (Hartmann, [6]).
The first important questionnaire study involving dictionary users directly was the survey by Tomaszczyk [7] who asserted that surveying dictionary users directly with a

questionnaire is the most popular technique of collecting data from dictionary users. Similarly, Nesi [8] noted that "questionnaire-based research is perhaps the commonest method of enquiry into the use of English dictionaries" (p. 3); she pointed, however, to some of the problems that are associated with the use of questionnaires in dictionary use research:

> Results are often a measure of the respondents' perceptions, rather than objective fact. The respondents' desire to conform, their (perhaps unconscious) wish to appear in some way better than they really are, or their inability to recall events in detail may distort the data. (p. 12)

Despite the fact that we should treat the use of questionnaires to elicit information with caution, we believe that using them in dictionary use research remains an important and useful methodology (Lew, [9]). Several up-to-date overviews of research in the field of dictionary use are already available. In what follows, we will tackle some of the most important issues that are particularly relevant in the context of the present study.

Bilingual versus Monolingual Dictionary Use

Whether a foreign language learner should use a monolingual or a bilingual dictionary has sparked a heated debate among educators and language teachers. Some educators, among them Baxter [10], supported the use of MLDs because they improve fluency by offering definitions in context; in contrast, BLDs reinforce learners' tendency to translate from the native language; as a result, they discourage learners from thinking directly in the foreign language. In addition, Baxter [10] suggested that the exposure to the defining language of the MLD would train users in their paraphrasing skills in the foreign language.

Likewise, Stein [11] believed that BLDs reinforce the belief in one-to-one lexical equivalence between the two languages, while the meaning of two words in two different languages is virtually never identical, except for certain technical terms in restricted specialist usage. Moreover, Stein argued that most BLDs usually offer a larger number of target language equivalents than just one per headword.

On the contrary of this, some researchers (e.g. Piotrowski, [12]; Bogaards, [13]) argued that it is the BLD that has been the traditional lexical resource of the language learner. In contrast, the MLD for foreign language learning is a new development (Cowie, [14]). Piotrowski [12] pointed out to the innate difficulty in locating the information in a MLD; he noted that MLD users find themselves facing the paradoxical situation where they need to know the L2 item in order to look it up, but the L2 item is exactly what they do not know and are trying to find.

In the same way, Tomaszczyk [15] presented two arguments for the use of BLDs by L2 learners: The first argument is that of interference between L1 and L2. Tomaszczyk suggested that "whether one likes it or not, language learners do rely on their mother tongue to quite a considerable extent. If this cannot be avoided, why not capitalize on it?" (p. 44). The second point raised by Tomaszczyk in support of BLDs is that the majority of dictionary users showed preference for them, as suggested by results of

questionnaire studies. He argued that if the users themselves selected to use BLDs, so they must have found some real value in them.

Moreover, Hanks [16] assumed that the metalanguage of definitions in MLDs differs from natural language in terms of register, lexis, syntax, collocation, and various more puzzling abbreviatory conventions that are typical of lexicographic description. Thus, learners will not benefit from the exposure to the target language in the dictionary. Furthermore, Neubach and Cohen [17] argued that users often find it difficult to understand definitions or words in the definitions in MLDs. They quote the following comments from students to illustrate the problem in understanding dictionary definitions:

> I don't understand this definition. What should I do – look up meanings of words in the definitions? Where does it stop? Actually the dictionary hardly ever helps me. I don't understand the definition and I feel that it hinders me more than it helps me. (p. 8)

As already seen, there is no shortage of arguments for and against both types of dictionaries; however, because MLDs may be seen as solving some of the problems presented by BLDs, most EFL teachers prefer their students to use them. However, it may be difficult for a student with insufficient vocabulary to understand a MLD entry that contains unknown words, which makes the whole lookup process time-consuming and even frustrating if understanding the entry requires looking up other entries with still more unknown words.

Frequency of Dictionary Consultation

How often do users consult their dictionaries? Answering this seemingly simple question requires special attention. User questionnaires have addressed the issue of the frequency of dictionaryconsultation by users, but findings obtained in this way have to be considered carefully, since their factual correctness cannot be guaranteed (Crystal, [18]).

Available results on the relationship between the frequency of dictionary consultation and learner's level are contradictory. Some studies (e.g. Knight, [19]; Wingate, [20]) found the frequency of dictionary use to increasewith level; other studies (e.g. Atkins &Varantola, [21]; Tomaszczyk, [7]) revealed a reverse tendency, with lower proficiency users tending to use their dictionaries more frequently. Atkins and Varantola [21] monitored dictionary use in translation by a group of 71 ESL speakers from fifteen different language backgrounds, and found no consistent pattern in their sample. Intermediate users recorded the highest rates of dictionary use, while beginners appeared to have consulted their dictionaries less frequently. Advanced users ranked between the intermediate group and the beginners.

Moreover, Jakubowski [22] investigated the use of BLDs and MLDs by Polish high school learners and found the frequency of use to be higher for students of higher proficiency level. However, questions about the frequency of dictionary consultation are often asked in the context of reasons for dictionary look-up (Hartmann, [23]).

Dictionary Preference

Surveys of learners' use of dictionaries generally confirm the teachers' suspicion that many learners still prefer BLDs to MLDs (Garcia, [24]). The preference for BLDs was obvious in the responses of those 228 subjects in Tomaszczyk's [7] sample. Tomaszczyk pointed out that "almost all subjects, no matter how sophisticated they are, use bilingual dictionaries" (p. 104). MLDs were used less frequently. Moreover, in Yorio's [25] and Bensoussan, Sim, and Weiss' [26] study, when the students were put in a free choice of using BLDs or MLDs, more than half of them showed a distinct preference for BLDs. Yorio [25] concludes that "although frequently inaccurate or misleading, the bilingual dictionary seems to give them security of a concrete answer, while the monolingual dictionary often forces them to guess the meaning, adding more doubts to the already existing ones" (p. 113).

Not all studies, though, have found BLDs to be preferred to MLDs. In Béjoint's [27] study only 17% of the subjects claimed to prefer BLDs. In addition, 85% of the students in the study had chosen their dictionary because their teacher recommended that particular dictionary. Cowie [14] pointed out that part of the learners' enthusiasm for the MLD is a result of their teachers, whose recommendations are highly valued and followed by large numbers of learners. As a result, "a wide gap often exists between a student's perception of the dictionary's value and its actual usefulness as an aid to learning" (Cowie, [14], p. 184).

On the whole, studies' results indicate that users exhibit a clear preference for BLDs because they hope they can find an instantly functional translation of a word they know in their language. In the following section, we will briefly examine the question of whether or not this relationship is affected by the user's proficiency level.

Dictionary Preference and Proficiency Level

A number of studies (e.g. Atkins and Varantola, [21]; Tomaszczyk, [7]) noted a tendency for higher-proficiency learners to use MLDs relatively more often than BLDs. In addition, Harmer [28] assumed that students, at early stages, will usually find MLDs too difficult to use because the language in them is highly complicated; as a result, these students will opt for using BLDs.

There is also the question of the different situations and tasks for which various dictionary types are employed. For example, Atkins and Varantola [21] reported that the principal use of MLDs by the higher-proficiency students in their sample was to aid in the comprehension of L2 expressions and to help with using a known item in production. Jakubowski [22] looked at the use of bilingual and MLDs by Polish high school learners at two levels, and found, at both levels, a strong preference for the BLD in writing, but less of a preference in reading and listening tasks.

In general, studies indicate that there is a tendency among language learners to prefer BLDs; however, this preference is less common among higher-proficiency learners who are likely to switch into using MLDs as their level improves. Harmer [28] concludes that:

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> Whether we like it or not, students will always use [bilingual dictionaries], especially at lower levels. What we can do is show them something different which is just as good-and in many ways better: the monolingual dictionary (MLD). (p. 168)

Information Categories Consulted

Word meaning is the information category which has been identified as the one that is most frequently sought by learners when consulting dictionaries (Hartmann, [4]; Garcia, [24]). This emphasizes "the dictionary user's overwhelming preoccupation with meaning" (Cowie, [14], p. 181). However, it should be pointed out that the relative need for specific information types is likely to depend on the particular task for which the dictionary is being used. Harvey and Yuill [29] investigated the use of the Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary by learners of English in writing. Their subjects reported that they most often looked for spelling information (24.4% of all lookups), with meaning in the second position (18.3%), synonyms and grammar ranked third (10.6% and 10.5% of lookups, respectively), collocation (8.2%), and inflection (5.9%). Spelling and grammatical information usually ranked somewhat high among the categories of information sought in dictionaries, though spelling tended to be wanted more by language learners than by native speaking dictionary users (Béjoint, [27]).

It seems that the relationship between learners and their dictionaries is so complex and entails a lot of interpretations. Therefore, we feel there is a constant need for empirical data on how language learners use their dictionaries. The next section of this paper will detail the research methods used to capture the empirical data.

Research Design

Participants

Fifty EFL freshmen students (females: 36, males: 14, *M* age= 18.6, age range: 17-25 years) took part in this study. The students were in their first year of study in the Department of English at Mentouri University of Constantine in Algeria. The main reason for our choice of sample was that these students belonged to the first year of the degree course and, in this way, we would be able to accurately know their starting point in terms of dictionary-using habits and dictionary use instruction. The subjects consisted of homogenous male and female students, all sharing similar educational and linguistic backgrounds and were regularly taking classes in 'Written Expression' with the researcher.

Data Collection

This study employed a questionnaire in order to meet the research objectives. It was based on the one developed by Hartmann [4]. Our questionnaire was comprised of 22questions divided into three sections:

In the first section, we asked questions which provided personal and academic information about the students who took part in the study. We mainly asked about gender, age, and duration of EFL instruction. In the second section, we asked questions

that directly pertain to dictionary use. We asked students about types of dictionaries owned, dictionary mostly used, priorities when buying a dictionary, frequency of monolingual/ bilingual dictionary use, reasons for looking up words, difficulties when looking up words and the reasons for those difficulties, use of appendices and usage guides and the "guide to the dictionary page". In the last section of the questionnaire, we asked the students about the instruction in dictionary use they received and the perceived usefulness of this instruction. (see Appendix for the complete questionnaire).

Procedure

The study took place during the researcher's regular teaching session and under his supervision. Before the questionnaire was administered, the researcher gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the study. The students were informed that the researcher was just interested in finding out how they use dictionaries, and that their responses would not affect their academic grades in any way. The researcher also gave feedback about the questionnaire's content upon the respondents' requests. The answered questionnaires were collected right after they were completed.

Both descriptive and analytical approaches were used to account for the raw quantitative data. The items in the questionnaire were first illustrated in the form of percentages and graphs and then were interpreted and commented on by the researcher.

In order to meet the objectives of the present study, the questionnaire was carefully designed to reflect the main themes which cover the overall aim and objectives of this research. These themes, however, are interrelated and complement one another, so it is extremely important not to view them as separate topics because they all contribute to the profile of dictionary users. Findings from the questionnaire's items were combined to yield a more complete picture of dictionary use by freshmen students of English.

Results and Discussion

In what follows, we present and discuss the subjects' responses to the questionnaire's items that directly pertain to dictionary use as such, as opposed to those items which rather provided general information on the student who took part in the present study.

Question 3: What type of dictionary do you own?

Three choices were offered and more than one answer could be ticked. All the respondents reported possessing English monolingual dictionaries, 90% of them either had English/Arabic or Arabic/English bilingual dictionary. In fact, the higher percentage for the monolingual dictionary was expected; we think that it has become a tradition in the Algerian context that the first thing students usually do as soon as they sign up for a foreign language class is to rush to bookstores and buy themselves monolingual dictionaries.

Question 4: What size are your dictionaries?

Three choices were offered for this question. Eighty-six percent of the subjects owned pocket monolingual dictionaries while the remaining 14% reported their monolingual dictionaries were medium-sized. However, it is our belief that pocket

monolingual dictionaries are not very useful to learners of English because they contain scanty information and may not deal with all the possible definitions of words. In addition, pocket dictionaries tend to neglect important details about vocabulary such as collocations and idiomatic expressions.

With respect to bilingual dictionaries, 90% (*n*=36) of the subjects said their dictionaries were medium-sized whereas 10% (*n*=4) said their dictionaries were pocket-sized. This result is reasonable and was expected, especially if we take into account that the landslide majority of bilingual dictionaries available on the Algerian market are medium-sized.

Question 5: Which dictionary do you use most frequently?

The subjects were asked to specify the dictionary type they used most frequently (monolingual or bilingual). The purpose was to concentrate the subjects' minds on what they would consider the most important single dictionary type. Eighty-two percent of the subjects used MLDs, followed by BLDs with a very low percentage (18%). The obtained results had not been expected; on the contrary, we assumed the students would use BLDs more frequently. Our implicit belief was that these students have no practical English language repertoire yet; therefore, we thought they would necessarily show preference for using BLDs more. Our belief was also motivated by Harmer's [28] assumption that students, at early stages, would usually find MLDs too difficult to use.

In *Question 6* the subjects were asked to provide the title and publisher of the dictionary they used most frequently. Regarding MLDs, there was no doubt that the majority of the students (72%) preferred the Oxford Pocket Learner's Dictionary, published by Oxford University Press (OUP), whereas only a few students preferred Cambridge and Longman dictionaries (06.38%). It should be noted that Oxford Pocket dictionaries are very popular among Algerian students of English, and part of their popularity is due to their huge availability in bookstores, their relatively reasonable price, and the excellent reputation of the publisher.

Concerning bilingual dictionaries, we found that students' responses were dispersed between: El Houda bilingual dictionary, published by an Algerian publishing house (AinMlila); Al Toullab bilingual dictionary, published by a Lebanese publishing house; and Oxford Word Power bilingualized dictionary, published by Oxford University Press. It should be noted that there are other dictionary titles that were reported but the students failed to remember the names of their publishers.

Question 7: Are you planning to buy a new dictionary in the near future?

Only 34% (*n*=17) of the students surveyed said they would soon buy a new dictionary. This percentage is logical, given the fact that the majority of students already bought dictionaries at the beginning of the academic year, so why would they buy a new dictionary if they already bought one?

Question 8: What is your priority when you buy a new dictionary?

Six priorities were offered and the subjects were required to choose up to three of which, which they think are the most important priorities when buying a new dictionary. The figures in Table 1 were obtained:

Table 1: *Priorities when buying a new dictionary*

Priorities to be considered	Percentage
The number of examples	78 %
Its size (weight)	50 %
The number of words	42 %
Its relevance to my needs	22%
A reasonable price	18%
The reputation of the publisher	4%

In fact, we believed that the higher percentage would either go to considering a reasonable price of a dictionary or the number of words in it. Unexpectedly, it turned out that our students are aware of the importance of authentic examples in learning English. What was surprising for us is the percentage of students who took the weight of the dictionary as one of their utmost priorities (50%), which was beyond our expectations. Yet, what was more astonishing is that all the subjects who reported the weight of the dictionary as an important variable were females. This might be taken to suggest that female students tend to have a superficial view towards dictionaries and that the only important thing for them is not to have a dictionary that is rich with words and examples, but a dictionary that best suits the size of their always-small purses.

Question 9: How often do you consult your dictionaries?

In this question students were asked to specify the frequency with which they consulted their monolingual (English-English) and bilingual (English-Arabic/Arabic-English) dictionaries. Five frequency rates were given and the percentages for each type of dictionary were obtained (Table 2):

Table 2: *Consultation frequencies for monolingual and bilingual dictionaries*

Consultation Frequency	Percentages	
	Monolingual	*Bilingual*
Every day	56%	13.33%
Three/four times a week	26%	6.66%
Once a week	12%	53.33%
Less frequently	06%	26.66%
Hardly ever	00%	00%

As shown in Table 2, the consultation frequencies for both types of dictionaries are quite contrasting. On the one hand, more than half of the subjects used the MLD on a

daily basis and about a third a few times a week; this frequency is logical since the landslide majority of the subjects already reported using MLDs more frequently (82%). On the other hand, about half of the subjects consulted a BLD only once a week, whereas less than one fifth used it every day, which is a very low frequency, but not surprising and correlates with the results obtained for question five.

Question 10: What are your main reasons for looking up words in a monolingual dictionary?

The subjects were asked for which specific type of information they consulted their monolingual English dictionaries. The results for the eight individual types of information are elicited in Table 3.

Table 3: *Information types often consulted in a dictionary*

Type of Information Sought	Percentages of Subjects
Meaning (definition)	100%
Pronunciation	100%
Spelling	66%
Usage examples	18%
Derivatives, compounds	06%
Phrasal verbs	04%
Idioms	04%
Collocations	00%

As had been expected, spelling, meaning, and pronunciation were the primary reasons for monolingual dictionary use. The figures emphasize the primacy of meaning and pronunciation over the other lookup reasons, though we had expected a higher percentage for spelling. The results also suggest that derivatives, phrasal verbs, and idioms are rarely sought by the subjects. Amusingly, collocational information appears to be the least popular and tends to be the last information type the students would ever think to look for in a dictionary.

The obtained results are quite reasonable; the subjects are still in their first year of learning English and have no practical English knowledge yet, so it is no wonder they show interest in the basic types of information first; that is, what a given English word means, how it is written, and how it is pronounced. However, we believe that these students would be more interested in the other types of information (phrasal verbs, idioms, and collocations) as their level advances.

Question 11: What kind of difficulties do you often encounter when you look up words in a monolingual dictionary?

Five options were offered representing the types of difficulties lay students are most likely to encounter. The obtained results are set in the Table 4:

Table 4: *Types of difficulties encountered when consulting a dictionary*

Type of Difficulty	Percentage of Students
Definitions are not clear	42%
The word I am looking for is not there	40%
The information I am looking for is not given	24%
The information I am looking for is difficult to find	12%
Examples are not helpful	08%

As illustrated in Table 4, the first problem students mentioned was that the definitions in their dictionaries were not clear (42%). This can be accounted for in two ways: the first explanation is that these students have no practical English vocabulary that would help them understand the definitions in a MLD. The second explanation is that the students' dictionaries provide vague information that it is hard for these beginner students to understand the definitions in them. This is what we think is not true, considering that the vast majority of the students (72%) possess Oxford dictionaries which are widely acclaimed as the most trusted English dictionaries.

Moreover, the students complained that they did not find words they looked for (40%). We believe this percentage is relatively high. To our mind, it would have been so logical if students complained that it was difficult for them to find specific information in dictionaries, which perhaps would indicate that these students are not good enough in terms of dictionary-using skills because they are not familiar with the metalanguage used in the dictionary, or possibly because the layout of the dictionary itself is not clear. The students' allegations indicate that they are honestly accusing their dictionaries' compilers of being deficient since they had failed to list the words the students wanted to know. This allegation is utterly illogical given the fact that 72% of these students have the Oxford pocket dictionary, which is compiled by the best lexicographers in England and specifically designed to meet the needs of beginner learners of English.

Another interesting remark is the percentage of students who reported that the information they were seeking does not exist in the dictionary (24%). This percentage is logical in the sense that 86% of the subjects have pocket monolingual dictionaries, which we already argued are not very helpful because they only list basic information about words and tend to neglect some peripheral details about vocabulary such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and derivatives. Therefore, if students are looking for such types of information, they most probably will not find them all in a pocket dictionary.

Question 12: What are the reasons for the difficulties you encounter when consulting a monolingual dictionary?

This question's aim was to explore whether or not the difficulties the students had are blamed on their inadequate dictionary-using skills or on the dictionary's inadequate design. The following results were obtained (Table 5):

Table 5: *Reasons for the difficulties when consulting a dictionary*

Reasons for Difficulty	Percentage
The dictionary is not very efficient (information is vague or inadequate)	46%
Unclear layout of the dictionary (organization of information is unclear)	44%
My lack of dictionary using skills	22%
My lack of familiarity with the dictionary	18%

It seems that the subjects are once again pointing the finger at Oxford dictionaries' compilers. As evidenced in the table above, the students attributed the bulk of their difficulties when using a dictionary to the dictionary itself, whereas only a few of them considered the difficulties owing to other reasons such as their lack of familiarity with the dictionary, or their lack of dictionary-using skills. The figures suggest that the subjects are free of all shortcomings and that their dictionaries are deficient. Nevertheless, the obtained results overlap with the results for the preceding question and this is what matters the most.

Question 13: Prior to using your dictionaries, did you ever have a look at 'the guide to the dictionary' page?

It was interesting to find out that very few students consulted the guide to the dictionary page prior to using their dictionaries (18%, *n=9*), while the remaining 82% reported they never had a look at this page. In fact, it was our conviction from the very beginning that the guide to the dictionary page occupies one of the last positions among the students' interests in a dictionary, which is actually not a good sign. The importance of the guide to the dictionary page cannot be underestimated because it provides useful information about the layout of the entries and the metalanguage used in the dictionary.

Question 14: Do you make use of appendices and usage guides in your dictionaries?

As had been expected, appendices and usage guides are among the information types rarely consulted by students (34%, *n=17*). This suggests that our students hardly take advantage of these guides, which we consider not a very encouraging result; usage guides provide useful information that students need to know, such as the list of irregular verbs, and the spelling and pronunciation guides. We believe that the familiarity with usage guides could produce an immediate effect in both understanding and time reduction of the lookup process.

In *Question 15*, the students (*n=17*) were exposed to a list of options that included the most common information appendices in dictionaries, and for which they were asked to pick out the items they mostly used. Below are the results (Table 6):

Table 6: *Frequencies for using appendices and usage guides in a dictionary*

Appendices and Usage Guides	Percentage of Students
List of irregular verbs	64.70% (*n*=11)
List of abbreviations and symbols	47.05% (*n*=8)
Spelling and pronunciation guide	41.17% (*n*=7)
Grammatical information	23.52% (*n*=4)

In fact, we did expect that the subjects would consult the list of abbreviations and symbols more often than the list of irregular verbs. Our assumption was that these students, who probably were out of touch with MLDs before entering the university, would rather use the list of abbreviations and symbols more frequently in order to become familiar with the metalanguage and symbols used in their dictionaries, which was not the case regarding the obtained results.

The proportion for spelling and pronunciation guide is logical, though we had expected a percentage of no less than 60% regarding the students' proficiency levels. The lower result for grammatical information does not surprise us as well, given the fact that 72% of the subjects own the Oxford pocket dictionary which, after we checked, we found not containing any grammatical information labels.

Questions 16 and *17* asked whether the subjects received any explicit instruction in using dictionaries and the duration of this instruction, expressed in the number of sessions they had. All the subjects reported having received instruction on dictionary use as part of the study skills methodology classes they had at the university. The subjects said the instruction they received lasted three sessions (90 min/ session). We believe the duration allotted for teaching dictionary use was not adequate in view of the great number of students per group (up to 50) and the level of each student.

Closely related to the previous question, *Questions 18* and *19* asked whether the students think the instruction they had in dictionary use was efficient, and if not, what they think are the reasons for the deficiency in the instruction. Interestingly, 74% (*n*=37) of the subjects claimed the instruction they received was efficient. On the other hand, 26% (*n*=13) thought the instruction was not very useful due to the inadequacy of instruction (61.53%, *n*=8) and the teacher's poor method in teaching (38.47%, *n*=5). Both reasons are logical, given the fact that the students received only very few sessions on how to use a dictionary, and if we consider the huge number of students per group, we believe it would be practically impossible for the teachers to check and make sure all the students benefited from the instruction.

Question20 investigated whether the students regarded themselves as efficient dictionary users. Unexpectedly, 56% of the subjects considered themselves not good dictionary users whereas the remaining 44% thought they were good. Actually, we had expected the results to be just the reverse. We assumed that the majority of students would stoutly defend their dictionary skills.

Related to the preceding question, *Question 21* asked the students to justify why they think they are or they are not efficient dictionary users. This question was open,

with the intention of encouraging the students to use their own words rather than just ticking boxes all the time.

As for the students who thought they were efficient dictionary users, much of them said it was because they found less or no difficulties when looking up words, and that they tended to find the information they were seeking easily. With respect to the subjects who thought they were not good dictionary users, some of them said it was because they were still beginner learners and tended to spend more time when they looked up words. Others said they often found difficulties since it was the first time for them to use dictionaries in which their mother language was not involved at all.

In the 22nd and last question, the subjects were invited to add any personal comments about their experience with dictionaries. In fact, only a few respondents took advantage to add any points (32%). Some of the interesting comments the students made, and of which much were in Arabic, were that they cannot do without dictionaries as they are indispensable for them to learn English and enrich their vocabulary. In addition, one of the students commented that she never thought using dictionaries would be so easy and interesting. This freshman student even claimed that using dictionaries was the easiest thing she ever experienced in learning English.

However, we found that using dictionaries was not that pleasurable for one of the students who frankly said that using a dictionary is boring but he most of the time found himself obliged to turn to it when he was stuck for a word he did not know. A student even said that she hates dictionaries despite the fact that they are useful, which we think is a quite paradoxical feeling. One funny comment was from a student who said that using the dictionary is harmful to her eyes because of the so-small writing in it. Indeed, when we checked this student's previous responses, we found out that she owned the Oxford pocket dictionary in which the writing is really so small.

Conclusion

In the present study, we attempted to investigate a range of issues related to dictionary use by a group of EFL freshmen students through questionnaire surveys. Our overall aim was to draw the profile of these students as dictionary users so as to advance an understanding of how they make use of their dictionaries.

The investigation of dictionary preference revealed that the average freshmen learner of English uses the monolingual dictionary more frequently; in contrast, bilingual dictionaries are used very rarely by our learners. These findings do not agree with the results of those studies which noted the preference for bilingual dictionaries at early stages (Harmer, [28]; Jakubowski, [22]).

The types of information that learners seek from dictionaries tended to be grouped into two clusters: 1- A dominant cluster which comprises meaning, spelling, and pronunciation. 2- A secondary cluster which consists of examples, derivatives, idioms, phrasal verbs, and collocations; these were sought less often and formed the peripheral information cluster.

The students attributed the difficulties they had when they looked up words to their dictionaries; they claimed that their dictionaries were not very efficient and that the information in them is vague and inadequate.

The results of the present study suggest that our students hardly take advantage of the appendices and usage guides in their dictionaries. We believe that the familiarity with usage guides could produce an immediate effect in both understanding and time reduction of the lookup process.

We believe that our students need more instruction in dictionary use since they already reported not being good enough in using dictionaries and thought the instruction they had was not efficient.

Limitations of the Study

The present study is limited in a number of ways: First, the methodology used may present some intricacies; potential problems with questionnaires were pointed out by Nesi [8]. We can by no means check the honesty of the respondents' answers.

Second, the sample used in the study covered only a very small range of students. Therefore, the results of this research cannot be generalized to all freshmen students studying in the Department of English. Due to time constraints, no systematic sampling method was used to obtain a sample that is representative of all freshmen students. The methodological decision of the sample size was motivated by pure pragmatic considerations since the students who took part in the study were taking classes with the researcher.

Bearing the aforementioned conclusions in mind, we hope to move to further research by administering similar questionnaires possibly combined with other methods to a more representative sample of EFL students in order to gain full insight into their general profile as dictionary users.

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