

Dictionary Use and Vocabulary Learning in the Context of Reading

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Abstract:

Effective vocabulary acquisition is crucial for language learners, with reading playing a pivotal role in this process. This abstract explores the relationship between dictionary use and vocabulary learning within the context of reading comprehension. Understanding how dictionaries aid in vocabulary acquisition during reading can provide insights into optimizing language learning strategies. Dictionaries serve as indispensable tools for readers encountering unfamiliar words. They offer definitions, pronunciation guides, and contextual usage examples, facilitating comprehension and retention. Research indicates that learners employ dictionaries to decipher meanings, thereby enhancing their overall reading experience and language proficiency. However, the effectiveness of dictionary use hinges on several factors, including learner proficiency, dictionary accessibility, and the strategic application of learned vocabulary. The interplay between dictionary use and vocabulary learning underscores the multifaceted nature of language acquisition through reading. By elucidating effective strategies and leveraging technological innovations, educators can empower learners to navigate texts proficiently, fostering a lifelong journey of language enrichment and comprehension.

Keywords: comprehension, paper and electronic dictionaries.

Introduction

Vocabulary acquisition is fundamental to language proficiency, and reading plays a crucial role in this process by exposing learners to diverse lexical contexts. Central to effective vocabulary learning during reading is the use of dictionaries, which serve as indispensable tools for understanding unfamiliar words encountered in texts. Dictionaries, whether in traditional print or digital formats, provide learners with essential information such as definitions, pronunciation guides, and usage examples. They enable readers to decipher meanings and nuances of words,

thereby enhancing comprehension and facilitating deeper engagement with textual content. Research underscores the significant impact of dictionary consultation on language learners' ability to expand their lexical repertoire and comprehend complex texts. The choice of dictionary type—be it bilingual, monolingual, print, or digital—affects the strategies employed and the efficacy of vocabulary acquisition. Traditional print dictionaries offer detailed explanations but may lack the immediacy of digital resources, which allow for quick access and comprehensive exploration of word meanings. Digital dictionaries, accessible via smartphones and computers, provide learners with instant definitions and contextual usage, thereby promoting efficient and continuous learning during reading activities. Moreover, effective dictionary use involves a balance between inferring word meanings from context and verifying them through dictionary consultation. This process not only enhances immediate comprehension but also contributes to long-term retention and application of learned vocabulary in various communicative contexts. Understanding how learners utilize dictionaries during reading sheds light on effective pedagogical approaches aimed at fostering autonomous vocabulary acquisition. By exploring these dynamics, educators can better support learners in developing robust vocabulary skills necessary for academic success and lifelong language proficiency.

Dictionary use has long been recognized as one of vocabulary learning strategies (Gu and Johnson 1996, Scholfield 1997, Nation 1990, 2001, Gu 2003, Nation and Meara 2010). Yet despite the important role of the dictionary for L2 learning and the relatively long history of the research on vocabulary learning through dictionary use, in the domain of L2 vocabulary acquisition, 'interest from a research perspective has been limited and sporadic over the years' (Ronald 2003: 285).¹ Fortunately, recent years have witnessed steady development of dictionary use research which includes investigations of the use and usefulness of dictionaries for various language activities. This study attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of dictionary use for L2 vocabulary learning in reading context. It examines the use of English-Chinese bilingualized dictionaries (henceforth BLDs) for EFL vocabulary task completion and incidental vocabulary acquisition during reading. This type of dictionary is hugely popular with Chinese EFL learners, yet has received little attention from researchers of dictionary use studies. By evaluating the effectiveness of such dictionaries for EFL vocabulary learning and identifying the problems with dictionary use, this research attempts to shed some light on vocabulary pedagogy and dictionary use instruction in a Chinese EFL environment.

2. Literature review

2.1 Dictionary use and vocabulary comprehension

Dictionaries are supposed to be useful aids to reading comprehension. However, studies comparing dictionary use and non-dictionary use during reading comprehension have yielded different or even contradictory findings. Some researchers (e.g. Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss 1984, Nesi and Meara 1991, Neubach and Cohen 1988 cited in Nesi 2000: 37–39, Heijnen 2000 cited in Welker 2010: 177–178) identified a non-significant relation between dictionary accommodation and test scores of reading comprehension. Such results were ascribed to the following reasons:

- a) the test itself was made up of items which were not likely to be affected by the availability of a dictionary,
- b) the dictionary did not include information needed to answer the comprehension questions, and
- c) the user failed to identify the words in the text which were most crucial for correct answering of the test questions (Nesi and Meara 1991: 643).

In addition, dictionary users' limited lexical knowledge, their lack of ability to infer and their lack of experience in dictionary use also accounted for the failure of dictionary access to have positive effect on test scores (Heijnen 2000, cited in Welker 2010: 177–178). Albus et al (2001) reported that a significant benefit of dictionary use was found only for the intermediate-level students, but

not for lower or higher level proficiency students. In Chang's study (2002), the use of glosses or dictionaries did not bring about substantially better results of reading comprehension than non-dictionary use, yet the case with vocabulary retention was different. Padron and Waxman (1988, cited in Szczepaniak 2006: 6) indicated that among fourteen strategies related to reading achievement, looking up words in the dictionary turned out to be a negative one. Aizawa (1999) even found that subjects in the non-dictionary condition achieved significantly better results of reading comprehension than those using dictionaries. In contrast, some studies demonstrated a positive correlation between dictionary use and vocabulary comprehension. Summers (1988) revealed that compared with no-entry use, the use of dictionary entries yielded substantially better results of comprehension as well as production. Tono (1989), later republished as Tono (2001: 75–83), showed that a significant difference in performance existed between reading comprehension with dictionaries and that without dictionaries. Similar findings were obtained by Bogaards (2002, cited in Welker 2010: 178–179) and Hayati and Pour-Mohammadi (2005). In Szczepaniak (2006), the monolingual dictionary was found to be effective for the successful completion of a paraphrase task as a source of the hardly inferable canonical meaning of idioms. Nevertheless, despite a 50% rise in scores after dictionary consultation, in only two cases (of the four idioms) was the difference between the dictionary and non-dictionary condition statistically significant (Szczepaniak 2006: 84). In other words, the study confirmed a mildly positive influence of the dictionary on the comprehension of contextually modified idioms. Electronic dictionaries have proved to be very useful tools for researchers to gain more accurate and non-intrusive information about dictionary use. One of the most frequently cited study is Knight (1994) which will also be mentioned in the next section due to its major focus on incidental vocabulary acquisition. The results of Knight's study concerning reading comprehension indicated that the dictionary group obtained significantly higher scores than the non-dictionary group. However, this overall result was due to the low verbal ability group only (Knight 1994: 293). In contrast, Koga (1995, cited in Kobayashi 2006: 59) showed that, for the low-reading-ability group, there was no significant difference in reading comprehension scores across three dictionary groups while the case for the higher-reading-ability group was different. Koga attributed the advantage of the on-line dictionary to the fact that it had less interference in the reading process and thus facilitated students' reading comprehension. The benefit of on-line dictionaries was substantiated by Zucchi (2010, cited in Welker 2010: 310–311) who found that the scores of the dictionary groups were significantly higher than those of the non-dictionary group.

Dictionary use and incidental vocabulary acquisition

Since its inception in stimulus-response studies in psychology and its subsequent exploration within the realm of L2 (second language) vocabulary acquisition, incidental learning has been studied under various paradigms, often contrasted with intentional learning (Hulstijn, 2001, 2003, 2005). In this context, incidental vocabulary learning refers to the mode where participants engage in learning tasks without prior notification of subsequent testing on lexical retention (Hulstijn, 2005). This study uses incidental learning as a technical term rather than an abstract concept, given the evolving challenges in distinguishing between intentional and incidental learning (Hulstijn, 2001, 2003). In contrast to research focusing on the role of dictionaries in reading comprehension, studies have shown greater interest in the relationship between dictionary use and incidental vocabulary acquisition. Many studies indicate a positive correlation between dictionary use and vocabulary retention. For instance, Krantz (1991, cited in Welker, 2010) found that students retained 15.5% of target words after reading an English book, with more proficient readers generally acquiring more words than less proficient ones. Luppescu and Day (1993) reported significantly better vocabulary retention among students who used dictionaries compared to those who did not. Similarly, Knight (1994) demonstrated that students with higher verbal ability learned more words, reinforcing these findings. Cho and Krashen (1994, cited in Laufer, 2003) suggested that combining reading with

dictionary use enhances vocabulary retention more than reading alone. Fraser (1999), in his exploration of lexical processing strategies, found that consulting dictionaries led to better comprehension compared to inferring word meanings, and combining dictionary consultation with inference significantly improved vocabulary retention.

Paper dictionaries vs. electronic dictionaries

A substantial body of literature now exists on the use of electronic dictionaries, covering topics such as their utility in learning tasks, effectiveness comparisons between different types, and the lookup preferences of users in computer-assisted language learning (CALL) contexts. However, there remains a relative scarcity of contrastive studies focusing on electronic dictionaries versus paper dictionaries specifically in the context of vocabulary learning. Some researchers (e.g., Koyama and Takeuchi, 2003; Iso and Osaki, 2004, cited in Kobayashi, 2006: 63; Kobayashi, 2007; Chen, 2010) found no significant differences in vocabulary learning effects between pocket electronic dictionaries and paper dictionaries. Laufer (2000), comparing the impact of paper glosses versus electronic glosses, discovered that electronic glosses resulted in significantly higher retention scores on both tests. This superiority could be attributed to the visual impact of a word appearing prominently on a computer screen in a pop-up window, or to the higher cognitive load induced by consulting electronic glosses.

In another study (Koga, 1995), online dictionaries were found more effective than paper dictionaries for the high-reading-ability group, though no significant difference was observed for the low-reading-ability group. Dziemianko (2010, 2011, in press) presented intriguing findings comparing online electronic dictionaries with their printed counterparts. In one study (Dziemianko, 2010), e-COBUILD6 outperformed the printed COBUILD6 in tasks involving receptive and productive language skills, as well as in retaining meanings and collocations. The author suggested that the presentation format on a computer screen, possibly more engaging and less distracting than printed headwords on a page, might explain the electronic dictionaries' superiority. However, subsequent replication studies by Dziemianko (2011, in press), under identical experimental conditions but with different dictionaries (LDOCE5 and OALDCE7 in both online and printed forms), did not confirm these findings. The e-versions of LDOCE5 and OALDCE7 showed no advantage over their printed counterparts in language reception, production, or learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of dictionaries in vocabulary learning within the context of reading is multifaceted and essential. Throughout this discussion, we have explored how dictionaries serve as invaluable tools for language learners, aiding in the comprehension and acquisition of new words encountered in texts. Dictionaries, whether in traditional print or digital forms, provide learners with immediate access to definitions, pronunciations, and usage examples, thereby enhancing their ability to decode unfamiliar vocabulary. The choice between different types of dictionaries—such as bilingual, monolingual, print, or digital—affects how learners approach and expand their lexical knowledge during reading. Digital dictionaries, in particular, offer advantages in terms of accessibility and real-time support, enabling learners to engage more deeply with texts and verify interpretations swiftly. Moreover, effective dictionary use involves a strategic balance between inferring word meanings from context and consulting dictionaries for clarification. This process not only fosters immediate comprehension but also supports long-term retention and application of learned vocabulary in various communicative settings.

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