

## Dictionaries Still in Use? On the Applicability of Dictionaries in Language Learning

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*The present paper gives a brief overview of the research on dictionary use and presents the results of a survey completed by upper intermediate level ELF Students of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania on the use of dictionaries. It also reflects on the vocabulary learning strategies upper-intermediate students tend to use, their difficulties in improving their vocabulary skills (known as the intermediate plateau), as well as on the factors that often hinder the acquisition of new vocabulary (e.g. the lack of certain skills, like noticing). Finally, taking into consideration the fact that students prefer the use of search engines and AI-powered tools, the paper encourages a vocabulary practice that includes the use of electronic dictionaries combined with linguistic databases and AI-powered tools, which can help students not only to become autonomous learners but also to develop their metalinguistic and collocational awareness.*

*Keywords: vocabulary practice, online dictionaries, databases and AI tools, intermediate plateau, tasks*

### 1. Introduction

Dictionary use has been undergoing significant changes over the past few decades. While in the 1990s we could experience the co-existence of print and electronic dictionaries (many dictionaries going online at this time) today search engines, like Google Translate, and AI-powered tools, like DeepL, ChatGPT, Google Gemini etc., are taking over. This has affected dictionary use massively – not only with respect to the source type (printed, electronic dictionaries, AI tools) but also with respect to how words are looked up (today searching for a word is expected to lead straight to the result).

After presenting the findings of the last few decades in this field, this paper shows the results of a short survey on dictionary use completed by the students of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania, Miercurea-Ciuc. It stresses the

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importance of teaching vocabulary to students in a way that includes the use of (electronic) dictionaries, linguistic databases and also AI-powered tools. It is to be expected that the spread of AI tools will continue in the future, these tools being improved by the day – a situation that cannot be ignored but should rather be embraced to a certain extent.

The paper has adult EFL learners (upper intermediate level university students) in focus, as other language learners (ESP) and users (future translators, interpreters) are expected to bring along slightly different vocabulary learning awareness and vocabulary acquisition skills. Similarly, elementary and pre-intermediate language learners would have significantly different needs with regard to vocabulary acquisition.

Generally speaking, it can be noted that upper-intermediate learners often get stuck and feel unable to improve their vocabulary skills. They tend to use the same constructions repeatedly and struggle to acquire new words and expressions – this stagnation, also known as the “intermediate plateau”, often hinders them from advancing their language skills. In order to progress from the upper-intermediate to the advanced level, vocabulary practice (with the help of dictionaries, but also that of databases and even AI based tools) would be necessary; how this could be done effectively, taking into consideration the expectation of students and their vocabulary learning strategies is the focus of the present study.

## **2. Research of the last few decades**

Curcio (2022), Ayçiçek and Gür (2024), Dringó-Horváth (2017) and also Nesi (2024) provide an overview of research (mostly based on survey and questionnaires) on electronic dictionary use. According to their findings, foreign language students mostly prefer bilingual dictionaries, whereas monolingual dictionaries are mostly used at an advanced level; dictionary use decreases as language learners reach a higher language level; besides the meaning of a specific word, foreign language learners mostly look up pronunciation and grammatical information; learners tend to go directly to the information they are looking for and often complain about long entries and explanations in dictionaries.

Curcio (2022, 76) also considers studies that concentrate on actual dictionary use (also electronic dictionaries), based on observations, usage records, experiments, analyses involving log files and even eye-tracking. The findings confirm students’ preference for bilingual dictionaries, and the tendency to scroll through the data rather quickly, often getting stuck at the first definition, without reading further. They point out that students often struggle with finding the appropriate

equivalent of a word in a given context, including polysemous words, homonyms, phrasal verbs and phrasemes, also because they tend to search for single words and rarely for phrasemes or chunks.

Aycicek and Gür (2024) focus on how technological advancements bring about changes in the attitudes, behaviour and habits of dictionary use of generation Z. Their study assessing both printed and electronic dictionary use is based on questionnaire findings, with 112 participants (74 female and 38 male) aged between 18-25), all of them specializing in language studies (American language and literature, English language and literature, English Language Teaching, Translation and Interpreting). Aycicek and Gür's (2024) findings show similar results to those mentioned previously, with some additional details (except for the first one they refer to electronic dictionary use): students prefer the use of bilingual dictionaries (72.3%); they mostly use electronic dictionaries (99.1%); they want to gain quick access to information (53.6%); when using electronic dictionaries students pay attention to the pronunciation of words (85.7%); they use dictionaries when reading textbooks, academic articles, and also while translating (more than 80%); students use electronic dictionaries to save time (more than half of the participants agree or strongly agree).

Dringó-Horváth (2017) also gives a comprehensive insight into dictionary use among university students (N=80, among them 69 female, 11 male). The survey-based research concentrates on several hypotheses regarding four major issues, i.e. the purpose of dictionary use, the type of dictionary/database/translation programs students use, the characteristics of a good dictionary as evaluated by the participants, and finally the acquisition of dictionary skills. Dringó-Horváth's study (2017) confirms the assumption that language learners prefer certain features in dictionaries and may neglect or not use other features at all (such as grammatical information). It points out that especially younger users (below 35) prefer electronic dictionaries and search engines, mostly the ones that are free, while language learners are not really aware of the advanced features paid dictionaries offer and are not willing to pay for them either. Also, with respect to successful dictionary use, the study confirms that students are more interested in the technology of finding a word than in learning about dictionary structure, and they also associate different features with a certain dictionary type (e.g. the need to scroll through various information is more linked to the use of online dictionaries). Finally, an important aspect of Dringó-Horváth's (2017) paper, also discussed by Curcio (2022), Márkus (2022), Lamido et al. (2021), Márkus et al. (2023) among others, is the importance of training students and teachers alike in the use of online dictionaries and databases, as they both lack the necessary skills to do it effectively.

Overall, the studies manage to point out the challenges of incorporating dictionary use in the classroom; challenges that become even more numerous with the spread of AI tools like ChatGPT. Today, we are not only experiencing paper dictionaries becoming obsolete, but digital dictionaries are no longer as popular as they used to be. Also, when looking up new words, students usually prefer the use of search engines (e.g. Google Search) or AI based tools, such as DeepL, which give quick results with little effort – and often do not intend to use dictionaries at all. This calls for the necessity for teaching methods that would allow for the combination of various sources, e.g. digital dictionaries, databases and AI-powered tools.

### 3. The results of a survey

In what follows, the results of a short survey completed by students of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania (N=70), upper-intermediate level (B2-C1 CEFR) between 2024 and 2025 will be presented. The survey had been designed to be short (in order to fit into the lesson) with the objective to learn about students' preferences for word search. It included a vocabulary exercise and a follow-up discussion on the future of dictionary use.

The survey was completed in three steps: first, students were given five expressions (*jack of all trades, coachload of, face the music, dire straits, go Dutch*) with example sentences and asked to try and guess the meaning of the expressions from the context (students were not familiar with most of the expressions). Then, students looked up these phrases in three online sources – the *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, the *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary* and *bab.la* (a British and American monolingual dictionary and a bilingual database) and also in one additional source of their own choice (what they generally used when looking up the meaning of a word). As a next step, students were asked to compare these sources and then decide which one they would recommend to others, and why. As a follow-up activity, the students reflected on their dictionary use overall, including how often they used dictionaries, the type of dictionary they consulted (whether they used both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries) and if they preferred electronic dictionaries to printed ones. Students were also asked about their preferences for context (if they favored words in example sentences), if they liked to learn about the origin of a word, its cultural specificities (e.g. British or American, formal or informal use of a word) and frequency of use.

Based on the answers the following situation emerges: more than half of the students (50.71%) often use dictionaries (or some kind of database), both monolingual and bilingual (64%); almost all of them (95%) prefer electronic dictionaries to printed ones, and all of them prefer to see words in their context.

Finally, about half of them (48%) like to learn about the origin of a word, its cultural specificities and frequency of use (since participants only had to put a tick here, without any further specifications, the answers may not be entirely reliable). With regard to the choice of dictionaries students' preferences vary between Merriam-Webster (27%), the Oxford Learners' Dictionary (25%), and bab.la (10%), while among other sources that students mentioned we find Google Translate (12%), ChatGpt (4%), DeepL (3%), Urban Dictionary (4%) – some of the respondents have not named any specific dictionary but only a preference for electronic dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, even dictionaries that come up first in a query, etc. Participants gave several reasons for their choices – the most common ones being easy accessibility and usage, up-to-date explanations, context and interface. According to the participants, a good dictionary is the one that shows the word in context, gives clear explanations, with synonyms, it is straightforward and easy to use, it shows the pronunciation of words and also gives examples of idioms (most common answers).

#### **4. Vocabulary learning strategies and the “intermediate plateau”**

Finding out more about students' vocabulary learning strategies can help teachers choose a suitable method for teaching vocabulary. These strategies have also received considerable attention over the last few decades. An influential work on vocabulary learning strategies is that of Oxford (1990) who makes a distinction between direct and indirect learning strategies, further grouping them in subcategories, such as memory, cognitive, compensation (direct) strategies, metacognitive, affective and social (indirect) strategies. Direct learning strategies comprise various learning strategies such as using visual imagery, rhymes, chunking (memory strategies), note taking and actively producing the word (cognitive strategies), guessing the word from context (compensation strategies). Different from direct learning strategies, indirect ones do not directly focus on the target language, nevertheless contribute significantly to vocabulary acquisition. They include planning and setting learning goals (metacognitive strategies), finding reasons to get and stay motivated, reducing possible anxiety (affective strategies), cooperating and seeking help (social strategies).

Drawing on Oxford's (1990) taxonomy of vocabulary learning strategies, Schmitt (1997) distinguishes between discovery and consolidation strategies: the former includes determination (e.g. discovering the meaning of a word from context) and social strategies (interacting with others, asking for clarification, paraphrasing), whereas the latter, memory strategies (using mnemonics, creating mental linkages),

cognitive (e.g. repetition, flashcards) and metacognitive strategies (monitoring and evaluating the vocabulary learning process). With regard to the vocabulary learning strategies, Schmitt (1997) notes that generally speaking, students use more strategies for learning vocabulary than for other aspects of language. They also tend to overuse certain mechanical strategies over others, such as memorization, note taking and repetition.

Other categorizations include that of Gu (2003), who makes a distinction between person-dependent and task-dependent strategies, or that of Nation (2001), who differentiates between a variety of strategies with respect to planning (choosing what to focus on), source (finding information on words, e.g. by looking at the context, consulting a reference source) and process (by noticing and retrieving information). The findings seem to suggest that students generally prefer certain vocabulary learning strategies in their language practice. Al Fraidan and Fakhli's (2024) study for example (a survey completed by 84 Saudi university students, among them 52 EFL and 32 preparatory year deanship students (PYD), all of them male) shows students' preference for metacognitive strategies, such as using language media, studying the word over time (EFL students) and also determination strategies, such as using the Internet to check the meaning of a word, guessing the meaning of a word from the context (PYD students). Schmitt's (1997) survey-based analysis (n=600, Japanese students of various age groups) also shows a preference of students for determination strategies (using a bilingual dictionary and trying to guess the meaning from context) followed by social strategies (e.g. asking a classmate for clarification). Both the determination and social strategies belong to the group of discovery strategies, in Schmitt's categorization of vocabulary learning strategies.

Despite the fact that students tend to use certain vocabulary strategies, once they reach an upper intermediate level (B2 CEFR), they often get stuck at what is called the "intermediate plateau", a learning slump characterized by stagnation, where students feel they are not making any noticeable progress in the development of their vocabulary skills. As students can easily express themselves at this stage, they keep using the same constructions (e.g. collocations containing high-frequency words) and may not feel the need to learn new words. Introducing language learners to various sources (electronic dictionaries they may not be familiar with, and language portals, like *bab.la*) and also incorporating AI-powered tools (like ChatGPT) in language practice can be particularly useful at this stage, as it may help students progress beyond the upper-intermediate level.

## 5. Vocabulary practice in the classroom. How?

While students tend to use certain vocabulary learning strategies (even if maybe not consciously and consistently), they often lack certain skills that facilitate vocabulary acquisition. An example is the lack of metalinguistic awareness, as students often fail to notice words in their context, which Schmidt (1990) considers an essential part of language learning. This means that students often do not pay attention to the context a word appears in and tend to learn words in isolation. Because of this their knowledge of collocations (especially that of medium-strength and strong collocations) characteristic of an advanced level, may also lag behind. Other factors that hinder the acquisition of vocabulary may include less focus on vocabulary practice in the classroom, especially of the ones that would require the use of dictionaries or linguistic databases. Students may not be used to turn to any type of dictionaries, inside or outside the classroom, and in case they are, they prefer using electronic dictionaries, apps or AI-powered tools. Bearing this in mind, teachers should try to incorporate them in class in a way that would allow language learners to employ several learning strategies, both direct and indirect, individual and task-related, in line with Tseng and Schmitt's (2018) observation, who stress the importance of motivational and affective strategies for vocabulary learning.

A possible way to incorporate dictionaries and other means that would foster the acquisition of vocabulary (linguistic databases, dictionaries and AI-powered tools) is a task-based approach. A task-based approach is founded on the concept of "learning by doing", where students are in charge of carrying out a specific task. According to Ellis (2009), in order for an activity to be considered a task, various criteria should be met, such as the existence of some kind of missing information, or gap that needs to be accounted for, and where language is mainly used as a means of achieving a certain expected outcome. Tasks often consist of a preparatory phase (pre-task) and a post-task phase, allowing not only for the completion of a specific task, but also for the introduction and reflection on/consolidation of some linguistic structures. Depending on the purpose at hand, tasks can be organized as part of one specific lesson or as a bigger assignment, touching on topics covered over the term, they can be carried out individually or in pairs/groups and also comprise several skills, like speaking, writing, reading and listening. They should, however, contribute to raising students' awareness of the importance of consulting dictionaries, linguistic databases (or even AI-powered tools) as part of their language practice.

An example of such a task could consist in introducing some linguistic constructions in the pre-task phase, then asking students (working in pairs) to look up these words in various sources and compare the given definitions (which is more easily understandable, shows more context, etc.). In order to strengthen collocation awareness, which is a prerequisite for a more natural-sounding language production,

teachers should strive to give as prompts not only single words but also larger constructions or even language chunks. For example, let us imagine the topic of the lesson is crime and criminality; after already having covered the crime related vocabulary included in the lesson, the teacher can think of additional activities to acquaint students with some new vocabulary (allotted time to the activities can vary between 10 and 15 minutes, also depending on how fast students work). S/he can introduce some crime-related idioms in the pre-task phase, such as *to carry the can* (to take the blame for someone else), *to cut and run* (to make a quick escape), *to be caught red-handed* (to be caught in the act of doing something). After looking up the meaning of these expressions in a source of their own choice, students complete a certain task as part of a written assignment, e.g. writing a short dialogue or a mini saga related to crime, or if there is already a story related to crime in the lesson, providing a different ending to the story by using some of the expressions given.

Students like learning about idioms, so introducing the website *The Free Dictionary* (an American online dictionary and encyclopedia that contains a thesaurus and a large database of idioms) can be useful. The search engines of this site make it possible to search for synonyms and idioms related to a specific topic. The teacher can think of various activities to introduce to students, e.g. s/he can ask students (working in pairs) to look for idioms related to crime-criminality, choose one they really find interesting then they swap partners and see whether their colleagues can guess its meaning from the context.

The use of dictionaries (and databases) can be combined with AI-powered tools in preparing or executing a specific vocabulary-related task. For example, by using Chat GPT the teacher can prepare a worksheet with quotes containing specific phrases (e.g. *snitch*, *knock off*, *conned (into)*) from movies (students usually like watching movies so they may enjoy this task) and then students try to replace the highlighted phrases with a synonym (by consulting a thesaurus or online dictionary suggested by the teacher). Alternatively, to consolidate the acquisition of these phrases, students can look up these phrases in the *Urban Dictionary* and see whether they could find any additional meaning or curiosities related to them. By doing so, students would need to scroll down and read all the entries given.

In order to reinforce the use of collocations, the teacher can also prepare a “Collocation search” task sheet using *Chat GPT*, where students would need to fill in the missing collocators based on the definitions given, e.g. *to stop a crime from happening = to prevent a crime*. After students complete the task they consult AI to check their answers. Alternatively, they can access an online collocation dictionary, e.g. the *Online Oxford Collocation Dictionary* and compare the given results with their work. AI tools can also be used for obtaining new information on a specific topic – in case of crime and criminality, this can consist in asking students (small groups of three to four) to make a list of actions related to investigating and prosecuting crime

in the pre-task phase, after which students consult an AI program and compare their ideas with the ones found there. At this stage, in order to carry out an effective search, the teacher will need to specify how the students should carry out the search (e.g. by giving the AI the instruction to create a list of collocations related to the topic). In the post-task phase, the students will reflect on the importance of these actions, and what they have omitted or added in comparison to the list offered by AI; in order to do so, students will need to go through the entire list, which can help them notice and also reinforce certain collocations related to the topic.

Using and combining various sources in a task related activity comes with several advantages: besides seeing a specific expression in several different contexts, students will learn about authentic language use (slangs, idioms) in a way that makes them feel in charge of their own learning. Doing this regularly, can help students adopt additional vocabulary learning strategies – this may lead eventually to a heightened metalinguistic and collocational awareness, prerequisites of an effective vocabulary acquisition.

## 6. Conclusion

To conclude, a brief overview of the research on dictionary use showed that in the last few decades the use of vocabularies has undergone significant changes. Not only are paper-based dictionaries less and less used today, but the use of AI-based tools, like DeepL and ChatGpt are often preferred to electronic dictionaries as well. In addition to presenting and interpreting the results of a survey completed by upper intermediate level ELF Students of Sapientia Hungarian University of Transylvania on their use of dictionaries, this paper also focused on the place of the dictionary and other reference works in the process of language learning, and more particularly in developing strategies skills that facilitate vocabulary acquisition.

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