The Advantages and Disadvantages of E-Dictionaries to Enhance Vocabulary Learning of ESL Learners

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Abstract
Among the common tool used by learners in a language classroom is the dictionary. Nowadays, dictionary has come in various types and among the widely used are the e-dictionaries. This case study aims to explore the advantages of e-dictionaries towards ESL learners together with the difficulties faced when using e-dictionaries. In this study, a total of ten undergraduate TESL students from one of a public research university in Malaysia volunteered to be the participants of this study. Focus group interviews, open-ended questionnaire and email were used as the study instrument. The findings revealed that although e-dictionaries provide some benefits to enhance vocabulary learning, there are also difficulties faced by ESL learners. It was found that the benefits are it enables them to learn about new vocabulary regardless of place and time, helps them to learn proper pronunciation of words, identifies the word origin efficiently, has visual impacts which contain interactive interaction, and gives clearer vocabulary instruction in comparison to printed dictionary. The main difficulties faced are limited internet access, incomplete definitions, lack of credibility on some bilingual e-dictionaries' developers, and lack of definitions and examples. In addition, the participants acknowledged e-dictionaries as one of the tools for helping them to learn their second language vocabulary in a non-conventional approach as oppose to printed dictionaries. This study would have direct implication on the teaching of language learning as students in this era use e-dictionaries in their learning process.

Keywords: reading in second language, benefits of e-dictionaries, difficulties of using e-dictionaries, English as a Second Language, vocabulary learning

Introduction

In order to establish one of the Vision 2020 goals, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed a National Policy on ICT in education. This move is to encourage and assist the national agenda (Policy on ICT in Education Malaysia, 2010). Since ICT is the key element in determining the effectiveness of the education sector, Malaysia has introduced ICT as an educational legislation reforms in order to establish a ICT literate society.

Melor et al. (2011) indicated that students have been using ICT for general purposes rather than specifically for learning purposes. Thus, the integration of ICT in learning needs to be encouraged among students as it could bring ample learning opportunities for the students, including second language learning. Maslawati et al. (2014) noted that the integration of ICT in language learning has benefited students as they are not just learning per se but are able to relate their learning with real life situation.

According to Golonka et al. (2012), e-dictionaries help to aid students as an individual study tools considering that it is a self-contained programme applications. Since there are few studies conducted on e-dictionaries in Malaysia, there is need to discover the learners' perceptions in using e-dictionaries in English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom, especially in the tertiary education environment. The present study intends to investigate the perceptions of ESL students on the benefits and difficulties in using e-dictionaries toward their second language vocabulary learning. This study aims at exploring the views of ESL students in using e-dictionaries toward their second language vocabulary learning. Such insight is helpful for teachers and educators as it provides useful information for teaching and learning the target language via the use of e-dictionaries.

In Malaysia, some courses offered at tertiary institution use English as medium of instruction. As second language users, many of Malaysian students face difficulties in reading reference materials in English. They have difficulties in understanding certain technical terms used in the notes, reference materials and lectures. Hence, the use of e-dictionary is seen as one of the learning tools in helping them to enhance their understanding in their readings through learning new vocabulary. Therefore, this study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the advantages of e-dictionaries to enhance vocabulary learning towards ESL learners?

2. What are the disadvantages of e-dictionaries perceived by ESL learners?

The findings of this study are relevant for teachers as they may need to provide proper training to their students to use e-dictionaries more effectively.

Literature Review

Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

Other than the Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL) is rapidly gaining users. Mobile devices such as hand phones, personal digital assistant (PDA) and tablet PC have been perceived as the ideal devices for individualized informal learning. Kukulska-Hulme (2009) made a comparison between MALL and CALL by pointing out that MALL enables a new approach of learning process. He further adds that MALL enables a new way of continuous learning as learning is not restricted within the four walls of a classroom but beyond.

Viberg and Gronlund (2012) identify three key terms related to MALL. First is about the technological concepts of learning where the concept of MALL is detached from the well-known learning theories, such as constructivism and collaborative learning. Second is about techno-centered concept which focuses on technology as the communication means between learner and content, and between teacher and students. Third, it looks into contrasting the contexts of formal and informal learning and how the integration of mobile technologies could aid language learning in various situations.

Empirical studies on e-dictionaries

E-dictionary is available online and dictionary apps are available on most hand-held devices and mobile phones. As stated by Lew (2010), e-dictionaries offer interactive ways of finding the meanings of word in comparison to printed dictionaries. In comparison to printed dictionaries, searching for word meanings is only a simple click of the mouse on the online interface and scrolling up and down the pages on the screen. Hence the meaning is found instantly. This is in contrast to the laborious efforts of flipping through the pages that hinder ESL/EFL learners to search for meaning, especially for words with multiple meanings and polysemous entries. However, the selection of dictionary is essential as some dictionaries provide definitions with too many unfamiliar words and sentence structure which leads to comprehension problem.

In language learning, dictionaries have significant role in assisting learners to learn the language therefore it is important for them to choose appropriate dictionary. In a study conducted by Lou and Li (2012) on learners' preference of using printed dictionary and e-dictionaries, they found that as the learners become more mature, they opt to use e-dictionaries. The use of printed dictionaries was more dominant when they were in school. However, the learners tend to not using dictionaries as their language proficiency develops. On the contrary, Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) found out that electronic dictionaries are indeed a tool to promote EFL students' achievement in vocabulary learning. Its ease and fun to use feature is one of the main motivators for students to use e-dictionaries. The visual impacts foster interactive learning and aid in enriching students' vocabulary. The participants of their study consisted of 60 female pre-university students aged 17-19 years old. The participants' first language is Persian and their level of English proficiency is lower intermediate. Their findings also revealed that some users only perceived e-dictionaries as thesaurus of collective knowledge. It merely served as translators and the users still face difficulties to apply the words in their own sentence construction.

Dashtestani (2013) research was undertaken to compare both EFL teachers and students perspective on the use of e-dictionaries for learning English. Participants of the study were 81 EFL students and 66 EFL teachers who responded to questionnaire. EFL students and teachers had positive perception towards using e-dictionaries for language learning. The benefits highlighted are ease of use and access, audio-visual features, portability, time efficiency, provision of sufficient input for students and enhancement of student autonomy. The difficulties associated when using e-dictionaries are lack of training on how to use, unsuitable versions of English-Persian bilingual e-dictionary, low quality of audio properties, and student and teacher unfamiliarity with the different types of electronic dictionaries. The teachers reported that the usage of e-dictionaries in the classroom is a source of distraction on students that could disrupt teacher teaching and student learning.

However, Fageeh (2014) states that e-dictionaries help students recognize thus identify the meaning and origin of English words. Therefore, e-dictionaries have indeed helped students improve their vocabulary learning as well as the attitude and motivation towards learning the language.

Research Methodology

Research design

This study used a qualitative research approach as it attempts to explore the benefits and difficulties of using e-dictionaries among ESL learners. Case study is adopted since according to Merriam (1998), it provides researchers with an in-depth understanding of a situation and the meaning behind those involved. Besides, a case study enables the researcher to answer "how" and "why" the study is being conducted while taking into consideration about how a phenomenon is influenced by the context (Baxter & Jack 2008).

Setting

This study was conducted at a public research university in Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia.

Sampling

Participants of this study were selected based on purposive sampling, in which according to Merriam (2009), purposive sampling enables the researcher to obtain detailed insights from the sample as well as in depth understanding about the research objectives. Ten undergraduate students taking Teaching English as Second Language (TESL) course from a local public research university in Malaysia volunteered to take part in this study. They aged between 22 and 23 years old and their level of English proficiency is high intermediate.

This research also complies with qualitative research ethics (Corti et al. 2000). First measure is only volunteers were taken as research participants. According to Merriam (2009), qualitative research should only employ volunteers as participants to comply with the research ethics. Before administering the open-ended questionnaire, the

researcher seeks approvals from the gatekeepers and participants to conduct the study. The researcher sought their consent and informed them the research objectives and procedure. Next, the confidentiality of the participants was assured by reporting them under a pseudonym.

Data collection and analysis

In order to triangulate and corroborate the data, three research instruments were utilized; namely open-ended questionnaire, focus group interview, and email responses. According to Creswell (2007), there are various forms of interview designs that can be developed to obtain rich and concrete data utilizing a qualitative investigational perspective. Interviews brought up thick descriptions of the studied subjects (Rubin & Rubin 1995) by allowing triangulation from other sources (Lincoln & Guba 1985). The participants in this study were divided into two groups. Each interview session lasted for 15-20 minutes. Moreover, focus group interview allow more responses from the participants as it encourages them to communicate among themselves such as asking questions and sharing their view points. Hence, this research tool is also useful in exploring participants' knowledge and experiences in-depth, especially on how and why they are behaving or perceiving in a certain way (Barbour 2008).

The distribution and collection of the open-ended questionnaire took place in the first semester of 2016/2017 session between September and November 2016. An open-ended questionnaire enabled the researcher to authenticate the participant interview responses (McColl et al. 2001).

Upon collecting data from open ended questionnaire and focus group interviews, the participants were invited to participate in an email response. The researcher collected the email address with the participants' consents. Email responses allow the researcher to have extended access with the participants compared to interview session (Coomber 1997). Kivits (2005) mentioned that the researcher has to adapt to the participants' communication style as each one of them has his or her own. Email responses allow the researcher to codify the questions and the participants can respond to it at their own convenience (Opdenakker 2006). The participants were given a week to complete the questions but majority of them completed it within two days.

Findings and Discussion

Benefits of using e-dictionaries

E-dictionaries are regarded as more convenient as they are more portable and flexible compared to printed dictionaries. The participants stated that they no longer need to carry the bulky printed dictionary and they could use it anywhere and anytime inside and outside of the classroom. They also mentioned that printed dictionaries require them to have perseverance in flipping through the pages to get to the targeted word definition. This statement is derived from the participants' interview responses (FGI), open- ended questionnaire (OEQ) and email responses (ER).

> "As for me e-dictionary is a gadget that has dictionaries where you can bring along or an app that you can get online or you search it online. It is more convenient to use than the usual dictionary" (Participant T5; FGI, OEQ, ER)

> "E-dictionary is more convenient because we don't have to bring anything except our phones and there are lot e-dictionaries online, you can just download it" (Participant A3; FGI, OEQ, ER)

In correlation with the findings of this study, the design of the dictionary itself plays an important role rather than the features. Besides, Lew (2010) supported that the use of e-dictionaries offer an interactive alternative in searching for word meanings of which printed dictionaries could not. Learners can bring it along to almost everywhere and anywhere as it is stored in their mobile phones and is proven to be more convenient to use, speeds up access to a particular word in search, and is available free of charge compared to the printed dictionaries. Users could easily type the targeted word in the type-ahead search and in a few seconds a list of definitions are given.

Participants T4 and T2 both mentioned that,

> "It is convenient whether it is on your phone or your computer. You can use it in class without flipping the pages and I think the obvious point is you don't have to carry the very heavy book around" (Participant T4; FGI, OEQ)

> "It is very difficult for us to bring the real dictionary and it is easier to just use our phone and actually it is great because we can search the words very quickly" (Participant T2; FGI, OEQ)

One participant highlighted that e-dictionary helps him or her to pronounce the word especially the difference in the American English (AmE) and the British English (BrE).

> "Okay, first of all it's free and then I've been using it since my foundation years where it helps me a lot in my looking for words constructing sentences and also in my, like I said in my phonetics classes. There's two way of pronouncing every words in UK and US" (Participant T1; FGI, OEQ)

The participants have been stating that e-dictionaries enable them to learn about new vocabulary regardless of place and time. Besides vocabulary, they also learn the difference between the British and American pronunciation, thus enable them to pronounce like the native speakers. This conclusion is derived from the responses from the Focused Group Interview, Open Ended Questionnaire, and E-mail.

> "I choose e-dictionaries since we are in the era where technology is dominant besides, it also guide us the correct pronunciation" (Participant A2; FGI)

> "I have learned a lot of new words using e-dictionaries, mostly on the online ones. It also helps us to pronounce the words like native speakers" (Participant A3; OEQ)

> "I learn new vocab with e-dictionaries because I take it everywhere with me. Now I can learn new words almost everywhere" (Participant A4; FGI, ER)

The ease of use and benefits gained are parallel to Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) study where e-dictionaries are one of the tools in promoting vocabulary learning among

EFL learners. They further claimed that extensive vocabulary is an important component in becoming proficient users of the target language.

Besides enriching learners' vocabulary, it also has visual impacts which contain interactive interaction compared to printed dictionary. On the other hand, the findings from Fageeh (2014) correlated with this study. E-dictionaries give clearer vocabulary instruction in comparison to the printed dictionary. This helps the learners to identify the meaning and origin of targeted word efficiently. This is because e-dictionaries also offer hyper link which connect users to other relevant websites. The provision of etymological analysis at the end of the entries also facilitates learning. E-dictionaries are also available as apps for portable devices and smart mobile phones which are convenient to the users. He further added e-dictionaries are favourable to adult learners in comparison to young ones.

> "I use e-dictionary a lot in class, when travelling or when I'm in a hurry. It helps me to quickly find the meaning especially when you're in a hurry. It has helped me to learn English vocabulary and its meaning in a new way" (Participant T5; FGI)

The ease of use found in e-dictionaries includes the web search, thesaurus and translating tool (for bilingual e-dictionary). These help the learners to identify the meaning and origin of targeted language efficiently. The difficulties found when using e-dictionaries are due to the lack of access to use e-dictionaries, incomplete definitions, difficulty in choosing the appropriate e-dictionaries and distraction in classroom. However, e-dictionaries have indeed been aiding them in learning new vocabulary on-the-go.

Difficulties in using e-dictionaries

Majority of the participants voiced out their concern in accessing through e-dictionaries due to the limited internet access, however, three participants gave more detailed response pertaining to the issue.

> "In my opinion, online dictionaries are good but you need to have internet access. The college I'm staying now is bad with internet connection, sometimes has connection but most of the time it does not have connection at all" (Participant T1; FGI, OEQ, ER)

> "Wifi connection at my college is very bad; you need to wait until midnight or sometimes I cannot access it at all. I do have mobile data but it is not enough sometimes" (Participant T2; FGI, OEQ, ER)

Apart from that, participants stated that they often encounter incomplete definition of words and insufficient information when using e-dictionaries. The incomplete definition of words usually comes from bilingual e-dictionaries (English-Malay) as they are not many reliable options available for the use in the Malaysian contexts. Participant A1 used both monolingual and bilingual e-dictionaries. According to the participant, bilingual e-dictionaries (English-Malay) lack detailed explanation which often is confusing similar to monolingual e-dictionaries.

"I think most of my friends have the same problem as me. Bilingual e-dictionaries (English-Malay) lack in detailed explanations, I think not only bilingual e-dictionaries but the monolingual too. I've encountered some but these e-dictionaries do contain some features as the hardcopy dictionaries" (Participant A1; FGI)

Participant T5 has been using monolingual e-dictionaries but the concerns rise with the bilingual e-dictionaries especially for the Malay-English version. Participant T5 suggested that e-dictionaries developers need to take this matter seriously by appointing credible individuals to develop the bilingual e-dictionaries.

"As for me, bilingual e-dictionaries are lacking in suitable word definitions for sure. Maybe there are not using qualified person to make it, I don't know I'm just saying it. There's no problem with the monolingual ones because so far it is okay for me. For the bilingual ones, something needs to be done" (Participant T5; FGI)

This finding is in line with Dashtestani (2013) whereby they found out those EFL learners have lack of access to relevant e-dictionaries. The inadequate definitions available in bilingual (Persian-English) dictionaries have discouraged the educators from using e-dictionaries in language classes although learners favoured to use e-dictionaries.

Another setback is classroom distraction which has been a concern for one particular participant and this consistent with Dashtestani (2013) study. Learners admitted to not giving their full attention to the lesson as they were occupied with their gadgets (e-dictionaries). "Oh, maybe it is just me. I am easily distracted. When I go online to search for the meanings, I tend to visit other pages too. I feel guilty for not paying attention to the lecturer in front. That is why I would prefer to use BESTA" (Participant A2; OEQ)

Despite the setback mentioned, tertiary EFL learners prefer to use e-dictionaries in comparison to printed dictionaries during their language classes and independent learning.

Conclusion

E-dictionaries search for word meanings quicker compared to printed dictionaries and according to the participants it is almost as reliable as the printed dictionaries. Besides that, it does not require the user to flip through the pages as it exists in digital format and user just need to type in few keywords on the search bar and the results will appear seconds later. Other than that, learners can learn how to pronounce the words properly. E-dictionaries are also one of the platforms for users to check their spelling as well as the synonyms. By doing so, it guides the users to be more competent in the second language.

Four of the difficulties listed were in line with Dashtestani (2013) study. Although e-dictionaries have its potentials, it also brings a few limitations and this issue needs to be looked upon by the e-dictionaries developers. Some concerns in accessing through e-dictionaries are limited internet access, incomplete definitions and credibility, and

classroom distraction which lead to learners not able to give full attention in class when they were occupied with their gadgets.

E-dictionaries have been helping the participants to learn new words due to its flexibility and ease of use. Since e-dictionaries contain visual interaction therefore it promotes self- learning concept. Besides that, it also gives clearer vocabulary instruction. The ease of use found in e-dictionaries includes the web search, thesaurus and translating tool (for bilingual e-dictionary). E-dictionaries are easier to use, it allows them to search for meanings faster compared to printed dictionaries. Aside from that, it also helps them to learn about the proper pronunciation of words. E-dictionaries are one of the tools in promoting vocabulary learning among language learners (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013). Besides enriching learner's vocabulary, it also has visual impacts which contain interactive interaction compared to printed dictionary. In addition, Kitchakarn (2015) found out that learners have positive attitudes in using technology in their learning as younger generation nowadays is adaptable to the world of information technology.

E-dictionaries content developer should collaborate with the experts in the language. The experts in the language should be able to provide decent understanding of the words as well as providing reliable explanation regarding the words. Teachers or course facilitators could suggest some useful e-dictionaries to the learners. This will encourage the learners to use it since it is being suggested by their teachers or course facilitators. On top of that, teachers can also promote the use of e-dictionaries in classroom. E-dictionaries are one of the tools used widely by language learners to develop their vocabulary list. Learners can learn at their preferred setting thus making them becoming more competent language users. By having a wide range of vocabulary, it will help learners to boost up their four main language skills; speaking, reading, writing and listening.

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