

An investigation into students' perception of utilizing online dictionaries in translation-interpretation

Una investigación sobre la percepción de los estudiantes de utilizar diccionarios en línea en traducción-interpretación

LE, Thi Kieu Van 1 & DAO, Thi Minh Thu 2

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ABSTRACT:

The Digital Revolution can be fairly considered to have shifted the paradigm in lexicology and lexicography. It has opened up new ways of exploring and representing the structure of the lexicon, testing diverse theories of word semantics, and compiling both manually and automatically ever larger and richer resources that reflect multiple dimensions of meaning and lexical organization based on solid empirical data (Gala N, Zock M., 2013). This digital era has witnessed the invention of electronic dictionaries, including both L1-L2 and L2-L2 ones. This empirical study aimed at shedding light on how tertiary students, who studied English at Vietnam universities, including Nguyen Tat Thanh University and Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, employed the advantages that computerized dictionaries enjoyed over the paper-based, traditional forerunners. To be specific, the concentration of this research was on students' preference for specific online dictionaries, their strategies of exploiting this unlimited resource of lexical meanings, as well as the obstacles they still had to encounter; therefore, plausible solutions could be suggested in order to assist both students and instructors in using online dictionaries more effectively and productively. The paper also concluded that the essence of a language or online dictionary would be rapidly developed because it would meet a fundamental human need: learn a language to understand more the culture as well as the cognition.

Keywords: digital revolution, online dictionary, students' perception

RESUMEN:

Se puede considerar que la Revolución Digital ha cambiado el paradigma en lexicología y lexicografía. Ha abierto nuevas formas de explorar y representar la estructura del léxico, probando diversas teorías de semántica de palabras y compilando de forma manual y automática recursos cada vez más grandes y más ricos que reflejan múltiples dimensiones de significado y organización léxica basada en datos empíricos sólidos (Gala N, Zock M., 2013). Esta era digital ha sido testigo de la invención de los diccionarios electrónicos, incluidos los L1-L2 y L2-L2. Este estudio empírico tuvo como objetivo arrojar luz sobre cómo los estudiantes de educación superior, que estudiaban inglés en las universidades de Vietnam, incluidas la Universidad Nguyen Tat Thanh y la Universidad de Educación de la ciudad de Ho Chi Minh, aprovecharon las ventajas que los diccionarios computarizados tenían sobre los precursores tradicionales basados en papel. Para ser específicos, la concentración de esta investigación se centró en la preferencia de los estudiantes por diccionarios en línea específicos, sus estrategias para explotar este recurso ilimitado de significados léxicos, así como los obstáculos que aún tenían que encontrar; por lo tanto, se podrían sugerir soluciones plausibles para ayudar a estudiantes e instructores a usar diccionarios en línea de manera más efectiva y productiva. El documento también concluyó que la esencia de un idioma o diccionario en línea se desarrollaría rápidamente porque satisfaría una necesidad humana fundamental: aprender un idioma para comprender más la cultura y la cognición.

Palabras clave: revolución digital, diccionario en línea, percepción de los estudiantes.

1. Introduction

Dictionaries have always been indispensable instruments employed by English learners to acquire new words and resolve second language barriers (Gaspari, 2007; Conroy, 2010; Garcia & Pena, 2011). Evidently, dictionaries are indeed the most readily accessible, most commonly used, and cheapest learning resources (Chan, 2014). In fact, research on dictionaries has invariably captured theorists, researchers and educators in recent years (Sánchez, 2005; Ryu, 2006). Nakamura (2000) viewed dictionaries as a great wealth of information for language learners in terms of knowledge about vocabulary, namely meaning, pronunciation,

parts of speech, collocation and structure, and detailed information such as etymology and register. Since the acceleration in the increase of technological popularity, learners have excited their attention towards usage of online tools when checking lexical recourses. No doubt, with the advancements of technology and the internet, personal devices and gadgets, namely computers, laptops, mobile phones have been widely and well integrated into education as they provide “anytime and anywhere education” (Cavus & Ibrahim, 2009) and facilitate ceaseless learning process (Gardner & Holmes, 2006) for learners. In other words, the period when paper dictionaries dominated the reference world has gradually expired and e-dictionaries rather than traditional paper products have eventually become prominent in word reference (Lan, 2005). Nowadays, in an era of internet and new media technology expansion, digital dictionaries are well under way of development and popularity (Jin & Deifell, 2013). Indeed, studies conducted in the last 20 years found out that language learners had embraced using electronic dictionaries over paper-based dictionaries (Al-Jarf, 1999; Tang, 1997). Lan (2005) discovered that 13 English language online dictionaries were as good as or even better than paper dictionaries in terms of quality. In agreement with this, Jin and Deifell (2013) stressed that superiority of online dictionaries lies in their innovativeness, namely their convenience, quick update, interactivity, and potential for designer/user collaboration. Furthermore, online dictionary tools provide learners with more various contexts which lead to better comprehension of language usage (Cárdenas-Claros & Gruba, 2009; Jones, 2003; Kaur & Hegelheimer, 2005). In light of findings from the research (Chun, 2001; Elola, Rodriguez-Garcia, & Winfrey, 2008; Lan, 2005; Laufer & Hill, 2000), benefits of online dictionaries range from vocabulary acquisition in reading and writing tasks. Other merits of online dictionaries include its fast speed in checking the new word compared to paper dictionaries Wolter (2015) and its convenience as no alphabetical knowledge is needed (Liu & Lin, 2011).

Manifold existing studies have mainly emphasized on students’ use of online dictionaries in dealing with translation-related difficulties and even in consulting language issues (Zengin & Kaçar, 2011). Other conducted research called their attention towards advantages of online dictionaries for vocabulary acquisition in reading and writing tasks (Chun, 2001; Elola, Rodriguez-Garcia, & Winfrey, 2008; Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Lan, 2005). However, fewer empirical studies have been implemented to have insightful views into how learners exploit online dictionaries as well as students’ dictionary preference when learning translation and interpretation despite their popularity (Hamouda, 2013). Furthermore, most implemented studies usually shifted their focus onto second language learners’ usage of online tools separately. In other words, little is known about how students use a combination of online tools in translation. Given the notion that EFL learners heavily depend on dictionaries in general and online tools in specific and that dictionaries play a pivotal role to their learning process (Fan, 2000), it is essential to digger deeper into their attitudes, preferences and habits of using online dictionaries. This research was an endeavor to explore students’ preference for particular online dictionaries, their strategies of exploiting these resources of lexical meanings, as well as their predicaments when dealing with online dictionaries.

Research questions

In order to investigate university students’ perspectives on using online dictionaries, the researchers aimed to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Which online Vietnamese-English, English-Vietnamese, and English-English dictionaries do students preferably use?
- 2) How do students make the best use out of online dictionaries?
- 3) What are students’ attitudes and opinions of online dictionaries?

Significance of the research

The present study offered considerable benefits to researchers and educators in the field of EFL learning and especially EFL interpretation-translation learning. The findings were also beneficial for teachers who have been on their way to teach and enhance learners’ translation-interpretation skills since this study involved investigating learners’ attitudes towards online dictionaries when learning translation-interpretation, along with recommendations on how to exploit online dictionaries in a more efficient and effective way. For learners, the research results were expected to help them to discover more flexible approaches to optimizing online dictionaries.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

A group of 98 students majoring in translation-interpretation was selected to be the participants of the research. All of the subjects were currently studying either in the Faculty of Foreign Languages, Departments of English, Nguyen Tat Thanh University and Departments of English, HCMC University of Education, Vietnam. Purposive sampling was selected in the process of choosing the participants as the researchers had been well aware that their selected group of subjects met basic and necessary requirements in terms of providing the needed information for their research questions and objectives (Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun, 2012).

Table 1
Participants’ demographic information

	Current academic school year	Gender

	1st year	2nd year	3rd year	4th year	Male	Female
Frequency	0	65	24	9	23	75
%	0	66.3	24.5	9.2	23.5	76.5

As indicated in the data, the majority of participants were studying at 2nd year and 3rd year of their program, and a small proportion was in their last year (4th year). None of the students were freshmen. It could be inferred that their levels were mainly intermediate and upper-intermediate. The questionnaire link of this research has been done by participants through https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScpXeHBwkI5HTUL7gCiuIjNTH3euOVolqS25kjVUeqVLEbdJQ/viewform?usp=sf_link. As indicated by Chun (2001) and Loucky (2010), students of different language competence levels demonstrated different strategies of using online dictionaries, and this similarity in the students' language competence tended to exclude unnecessary biases among the responses.

2.2. Instrument

After carefully evaluating the situation and research purposes, a survey research design appeared to be most appropriate as according to Creswell (2012), this approach will facilitate investigating "attitudes opinions, beliefs, and practices" of participants. A total of 120 questionnaires were delivered to the selected sample group under the format of online Google Form. As a result, 98 responses were recorded, accounting a response rate of roughly 82%. There were totally 15 items in form of closed-ended, semi-closed-ended, and open-ended formats in the questionnaire, comprising three different subsections. The first three questions were devoted to detailed information from the participants, ranging from their gender, current school year to their major. Seven following items were intended to explore the usage of online dictionaries of the sample subjects, which asked the participants the frequency, kinds of gadgets to check words' meanings, number of online dictionaries used for one unknown, word preferable online dictionaries and their purposes in using online dictionaries for translation-interpretation. Aiming to seek the students' opinions on using online dictionaries, the last section five items focused on benefits and drawbacks of online dictionaries, features of a preferable online dictionary, personal tips, and effects of online dictionaries on the study of translation-interpretation.

2.3. Data analysis

The researchers employed both quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis. On the first stage, the data obtained from the questionnaire was analyzed, tabulated and interpreted by means of frequency and percentages to present results of the closed-ended and semi-closed-ended questions. Later then, the two open-ended questions in terms of influences of online dictionaries on the users were categorized, synthesized and analyzed by highlighting common patterns or themes appearing in the students' answers. Since all responses to these two open-ended items were in English, translation was not needed.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Preferable online dictionaries

So as to find out what were the subjects' favorable online dictionaries, lists of dictionaries were provided for their choice. Apart from this, the participants were encouraged to provide those which were not presented in the list. Table 2 presents the list of selected online dictionaries and the percentage of students choosing them.

Table 2
Students' preferable online dictionaries

Online dictionaries	Names	Frequency	%
Vietnamese-English English-Vietnamese	www.dict.laban.vn	22	22.4
	www.tratu.soha.vn	34	34.7
	Google Translation	46	46.6
	www.vdict.com	27	27.6
	www.vi.glosbe.com	4	4
	TFLAT dictionary (software)	4	4
	Lạc Việt dictionary (software)	4	4

English-English	www.dictionary.cambridge.org	40	41.2
	www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com	74	76.3
	www.macmillandictionary.com	16	16.5
	www.merriam-webster.com	11	11.3
	www.ldoceonline.com	1	1
	www.urbandictionary.com	1	1
	http://www.thesaurus.com	2	2

The findings showed that Google Translation turned out to be the most common online resource that students relied on when they wanted to translate from L1 to L2 and vice versa, with nearly half of the subjects choosing it. The second most common online Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese dictionary is www.tratu.soha.vn, followed by www.dict.laban.vn and www.vdict.com. Interestingly, participants added 2 dictionaries under the format of smart phones and computer software apart from the provided ones in the questionnaire list, namely TFLAT and Lạc Việt.

In terms of online English-English dictionaries, students apparently preferred famous and reliable ones including Oxford, Cambridge, MacMillan, and Merriam Webster, among which Oxford was significantly more popular than the others with more than three-quarters of the participants depending on it for translating and interpreting new words. Furthermore, the results indicated that looking up word synonyms was also the students' concern.

Regarding the frequency of their preferable online dictionaries, the figures for online and printed dictionaries were approximately equal in the percentage. Specifically, 49.5% students said that they used both online Vietnamese-English, English-Vietnamese and English-English dictionaries with more or less the same frequency, whereas 45.4% students reported more frequent use of online Vietnamese-English and English-Vietnamese dictionaries. Finally, only a small proportion of the subjects, at 5.2%, indicated their common usage of English – English dictionaries.

These results are consistent with Jin and Deifell (2013) concluding that Google Translate and Google search are the two most popular online dictionaries. Similarly, Wuttirikunlaya (2012) found that L2 learners were favor of search engines and encyclopedias to search for the contents. Apart from online dictionaries, Fujii (n.d) discovered that learners in his study also employed machine translation to translate texts to target texts.

3.2. Strategies of using online dictionaries

The findings later then revealed detailed information about the learners' favorable online dictionaries regarding their habits, purposes, and tips when exploiting these electronic dictionaries, thus helping the researchers obtain deeper insights into the practices of the students in using online dictionaries,

Table 3
Students' practices of using
online dictionaries

	Frequency per week				Electronic devices			No. of online dictionaries in use for 1 unknown word		
	1-5 times	6-10 times	11-15 times	≥16 times	Smart phone	Laptop	Tablet	1	2-3	≥4
Frequency	16	30	15	37	83	48	3	16	61	21
%	16.3	30.6	15.3	37.8	84.7	49	3.1	16.3	62.2	21.4

The majority of students assessed online dictionaries either 6 to 10 times or more than 16 times a week. Smart phones were by far the most popular gadgets being used, which was completely comprehensible as according to Cavus and Ibrahim (2009) these devices were naturally portable to assess anytime and anywhere. The results also discovered that when looking up meaning(s) of an unknown word, they tended to check two to even four different online dictionaries simultaneously to secure the reliability and accuracy of that word. This finding implied that no matter how reliable an online dictionary was, students still felt the need to ensure the accuracy by comparing its results to those of other online dictionaries available.

Table 4
Purposes of using online dictionaries in translation- interpretation

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Purpose	Frequency	%
Checking word meanings	90	91.8
Finding examples of word usage	49	50
Finding synonyms or antonyms	44	44.9
Finding collocations	40	40.8
Checking word spellings	38	38.8
Checking grammatical features	29	29.6
Identifying certain meanings in different contexts	1	1

As indicated from the above table, the main reason why students used online dictionaries was to check meanings of words. The same justification was for the practice of paper dictionaries. However, it was noticeable that the participants did not overlook the roles of dictionaries in aiding them to find examples, synonyms, antonyms, collocations, spellings, and grammatical features. These results are in line with the study of Jin and Deifell (2013), indicating that learners often use multiple online dictionaries and other digital resources for multiple purposes such as checking lexical as well as contextual meanings, word orders, forms, and pronunciation when accomplishing speaking, writing, reading and listening assignments.

In terms of strategies for using online dictionaries effectively, the results from the participants were diverse but could be summarized into four major tips as follows:

(i) Combine both Vietnamese-English (and vice versa) and English-English online dictionaries when it comes to checking a word. Avoid solely relying on merely one kind.

(ii) Pay attention to contexts in which the words are used. Try to remember the contexts and examples of the presenting word.

(iii) Choose brilliant and trustworthy online dictionaries. Use two to three of them simultaneously when possible.

(iv) Try to learn and remember as many vocabulary items as possible so as to avoid being over-dependent on dictionaries.

Below were the details of 3 out of 72 responses that well represented those of the others when it comes to tips of exploiting electronic dictionaries:

"I think it's better to check the meaning of one unknown word from different dictionaries. Also, using both Vietnamese – English and English – English online dictionaries simultaneously is necessary because by doing that you can know how to express meanings in each language exactly."

"Online dictionaries are very useful, but use them carefully. If you're unsure about a word or how to use it, look it up in the dictionaries but don't rely too much on it. Trust your English."

"Whenever looking up an unknown word, focus on the context that this word is used in order to translate properly rather than just look for the meanings only."

Attitudes and opinions of online dictionaries

Given the notion that understanding learners' attitudes is of paramount importance, this section of the paper devoted to digging into this aspect. Particularly, students' perceptions on online dictionaries in terms of advantages as well as disadvantages, as well as on how online dictionaries affected their learning of translation-interpretation would be the focal points. Additionally, criteria making an ideal online dictionary would be then discovered.

Table 5
Benefits and drawbacks
of using online dictionaries

		Frequency	%
Benefits	Time-saving	43	43.9
	Space-saving	3	3.1
	Convenient	36	36.7
	Reliable	2	2

	Informative	10	10.2
	All of the above	2	2
	Free	1	1
Drawbacks	Internet access is a must.	48	49
	Users can be distracted by advertisements or other websites.	21	21.4
	Users cannot make notes or highlight important details.	19	19.4
	Online dictionaries sometimes are not allowed in examinations.	46	46.9
	Eye strain can happen.	1	1

As indicated from the results, the two most outstanding benefits of online dictionaries included "time-saving" and "convenient", with 43.9% and 36.7% of responses respectively. These findings were understandable as just with a few clicks students could probably discover as much as they wanted about a word, without having to bring an extra thick paper-based dictionary with them everywhere 24/7. The favorability of students towards online dictionaries is supported by Zangin and Kaçar (2011), thus stimulating learners to employ online dictionaries more often than paper dictionaries. In addition, most learners in Jin's and Deifell's study (2013) viewed bilingual online dictionaries as an essential tool for a foreign language learning. In consistent with this, Stein (1989) pinpointed that learners frequently hold their favorable view on bilingual dictionaries because of its effectiveness in providing ready translation equivalents for common words and exact translation equivalents for terminologies in technical and scientific fields.

Apart from decent characteristics of online dictionaries, the findings also pinpointed their downsides. The students indicated that internet interruption was among drawbacks when exploiting online dictionaries. In other words, to continuously use online dictionaries, internet access was a must, which the participants thought to some extent this could be rather problematic in places of no internet or weak internet connection. Some participants also expressed under some circumstances, the use of electronic devices was prohibited, for example during an examination. Besides, annoying factors such as advertisements or the impossibility to make notes also restricted the students' use of online dictionaries.

Table 6
Features of a preferable
online dictionary

Features	Frequency	%
User-friendly website design	6	6.2
Detailed explanations of word meanings	39	40.2
Available links between an entry of one word and other related words	18	18.6
Different examples of word usage for different contexts	27	27.8
Practice activities	4	4.1
Few advertisements	1	1

Considering what components would make an excellent online dictionary, it was shown that the contents of entries were what the students paid most attention to. Specifically, a proportion of 40.2% of the subjects said they needed word meanings to be explained thoroughly, as opposed to 27.8% of them who indicated that examples for different contexts should be provided. These findings were akin to previous studies, which indicated a wide variety of contexts in an online dictionary helped its users learn second language more fluently and successfully (Jones, 2003; Kaur & Hegelheimer, 2005). Furthermore, technical features such as website design and advertisements turned out to be not as important as the contents. These reported drawbacks are consistent with the study of Jin's and Deifell (2013) who considered online dictionaries, although being an essential tool for their language learning process, were not all are reliable. The similar finding in this matter could be found in Laufer's study (1997). Tomaszczyk's study (1979) suggested that despite being aware of inferiority of bilingual dictionaries in terms of contents and reliability, learners in his research hold positive perception of bilingual dictionaries when compared to monolingual dictionaries. Similar perceptions could be

found in findings of other studies conducted by Bejoint (1981), Laufer (1997), Lew (2004), AlQahtani (2005), and Schmitt (1997).

Last but not least, students shared how online dictionaries had influenced their study of translation and interpretation. Digital dictionaries have been proven to have been beneficial in terms of vocabulary learning (Laufer & Hill, 2001); therefore, in this study the subjects were asked to focus on their study of translation and interpretation only. The researchers noticed that there were two tendencies: positive effects and negative effects. Certain responses under each tendency were as follows:

Positive effects:

"Online dictionaries play an important role in my translation – interpretation study. They make my study easier and better."

"They enable me to have an access to diverse information about the words including the meanings, the usages, the examples, etc."

"I like to use online dictionaries rather than paper dictionaries. It is time-saving, fast, and easy to use. In addition, it also gives me related words and many different examples to help me understand the meanings better."

Negative effects:

"I become lazy."

"It makes me depend on it."

"In terms of negative aspects, sometimes I become passive and dependent on online dictionaries."

4. Conclusions

The findings of this research did shed lights on the understanding of tertiary students' usage of electronic dictionaries. The study's results were found in line with previous empirical studies of the same topic. Noticeably, the findings revealed that online dictionaries generally appeared to be perceived as beneficial among university students whose major is translation and interpretation. It is essential to mention that Vietnam-based digital dictionaries have been blossoming in its popularity, especially www.vdict.com, www.tratu.soha.vn, and www.dict.laban.vn.

Interestingly, among diverse online dictionaries, Google Translation was found to be by far the most favorable L1-L2 digital dictionary, whereas Oxford online dictionary was the most common monolingual one to Vietnamese university students. Regarding English-English electronic dictionaries, famous ones such as Cambridge and Mac Millan were considered reliable and trustworthy by a significant proportion of the subjects.

With the learners' decent perception of online dictionaries, it was understandable to discover that the students used online dictionaries on a very regular basis during their learning process. Particularly, smart phones were the most common gadgets for the students to look up words by means of online dictionaries in a quick and convenient way. This explained why a word could be checked more than two times by the students when they wanted to assure the results provided by online dictionaries.

Conspicuously, the surveyed subjects were diverse when it comes to purposes of using online dictionaries. Among them, checking meanings, finding synonyms along with antonyms, looking up collocations and examples turn out to be the most outstanding ones. However, the study also discovered interesting information about the students' views of their habits of using online dictionaries as some of the participants expressed their reluctance to be over-reliant on online dictionaries. Instead, they were cognizant of the importance of using their own vocabulary knowledge.

Furthermore, as for the learners, they perceived that it was necessary to take advantage of both bilingual and monolingual online dictionaries for the best grasp of all aspects of words. The subjects showed their enjoyment when using online dictionaries compared to printed versions. Particularly, benefits of online dictionaries over paper-based dictionaries regarding fast speed and convenience were singled out by the participants. However, sometimes, using online dictionaries could be halted by some predicaments. One of the barriers was the interruption of internet access while using. Also, advertisements on online dictionary webpages could act as annoying distractions for the users. Finally, as the matter of fact, online dictionaries were not invariably allowed during exams, which caused troubles to the students to certain extents especially for those who were too over-dependent on online dictionaries.

Given that the benefits of online dictionaries are sizeable, it is suggested that learners should learn how to exploit them in the best possible way. Teachers could be a source of help in aiding the learners to maximize the benefits and minimize the drawbacks. To this end, instructors could stress on the importance of self-discipline so that students can avoid distractions and abuse while making use of these dictionaries. As for the learners themselves, having records of new words by keeping a diary or workbook in order to enlarge their vocabulary knowledge and avoid being passive and reliant on electronic dictionaries is advisable.

It should be noticeable that there were several limitations in this research investigation. Thus, results obtained should be evaluated within these limitations. One of the limitations of the study was the sample size; therefore, future research can widen the participant population. Additionally, the study also limited itself to the investigation of the perception of learners majoring in translation-interpreting. Further studies may concern investigation the use of online dictionaries among learners of English in general.

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1. Dean of Faculty of Foreign Languages at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Vietnam.

2. Full-time lecturer and academic advisor working in English Department, Ho Chi Minh City University of Education, Vietnam

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