Empirical research on dictionary use in foreign-language learning: survey and discussion
Hulstijn, J.H.; Atkins, B.T.S.

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Jan H. Hulstijn & B. T. Sue Atkins

Empirical research on dictionary use in foreign-language learning: survey and discussion

Abstract

This paper begins with a brief survey, in the form of a classified bibliography of research into dictionary discussion follows of the type of research required in order to increase one’s insight into the cognitive involved in using a dictionary; the principal factors which affect the outcome are listed. Two samples research design are outlined. The objective of such studies is given as setting the scene for a new genre electronic dictionaries, optimally customizable by users according to their individual look-up hal linguistic needs.

1. Survey

The subject of dictionary use is very much alive today, as is evidenced by the numerous scholarly papers devoted to it. In order to bring up to date the survey by Bogaards (1988), a search of the literature was conducted, starting from the Linguistics and Language Be Abstracts, San Diego, California (LLBA) and thereafter tracing publications referred papers listed there. This brought to light some fifty published papers reporting on various investigations in which the dictionary was involved in one way or another. The studies identified were classified under seven headings, according to the aspects of dictionary covered in each, and are listed here for reference without further comment. In the case studies whose abstracts appear in the LLBA source, their LLBA entry numbers have been included in the bibliography at the end of this paper. It should be remembered that studies listed below are not wholly dedicated to the topic under which they are classified, (although some are), but they all contain a substantial amount of material relating to that topic.

1.1 The attitudes, needs, habits and preferences of dictionary users

This broad domain covers studies which gather information about dictionary themselves: what they think about their dictionaries, what they expect from them, what customarily use them for, and the types of dictionaries they choose for various tasks.

1.2 Text or word comprehension

This type of research focuses on how readers arrive at an understanding of the text they are reading, having regard to the following factors:

- the presence or absence of a dictionary (since that affects the time required for the reading, as well as the comprehension of the text);
- the type of dictionary used: monolingual or bilingual;
- the medium: electronic or print dictionary;
- various factors relating to the text itself, e.g. the frequency or 'difficulty' of the vocabulary, its perceived importance in the understanding of the text, the inferability of the words looked up, etc.;
- lexical aspects of the way in which the dictionary explains the meaning of words, i.e. the entry component or components involved: the style of the definitions, possible restrictions on the defining vocabulary, whether the examples are authentic or composed, etc.

The principal dependent variable being evaluated here is the reader's comprehension either of the text as a whole, or of selected lexical items in the text.

The following articles relate to this topic: Atkins & Varantola (Monitoring Dictionary Use in this volume); Aust, Kelley & Roby (1993); Bensoussan, Sim & Weiss (1984); Bogaards (1994, and this volume); Britto (1992); Hulstijn (1993); Hulstijn, Hollander & Greidanus (1996); Laufer (1993); MacGregor & Thomas (1988); Roby (1993); Summers (1988); Tono (1987, 1988, 1989); Walberg & Ling (1985).

1.3 Text or word production

The main research question in this type of research is how language production is influenced by the following factors:

- the presence or absence of a dictionary (since that affects the quality of the text produced);
- the type of reference work used: monolingual dictionary, monolingual thesaurus, or bilingual dictionary;
- the medium: electronic or print;
- lexical aspects of the explanation of word usage found by the reader in the work consulted.

The variable being evaluated here is the proportion of errors in a written task resulting from misinterpretation of the reference information.

The following articles relate to this topic: Ard (1982); Atkins et al. (1987); Atkins & Knowles (1990); Atkins & Varantola (Language Learners Using Dictionaries and Monitoring Dictionary Use, both in this volume); Hatherall (1984); Herbst, (1985); Huang (1985); Laufer (1992, 1993); Meara & English (1988); MacGregor & Thomas (1988); Mullich (1990); Nesi (1994), Nesi & Meara (1994); Nesi (this volume); Neubauer (1985); Nuccorini (1994).

1.4 Vocabulary learning

This category contains studies on vocabulary learning, both incidental to other tasks and as a specific objective in itself, and covers:

- incidental vocabulary learning through the use of a dictionary to facilitate reading or writing in a foreign language, taking account of:
day to create dictionaries, electronic of course, whose design and contents are rich and flexible, and which are open to extensive adaptation by users, according to their various needs and the different ways in which they use their dictionaries. This section owes much to Bogaards (1995) and Hartmann (1987, 1995), whose influence we gratefully acknowledge. Atkins (1996) gives some idea of one such dictionary might contain and how it might function.

We do not concern ourselves with research into reading, writing or language learning per se, nor with market research, but with research which aims at bringing the dictionary to the user (how can the dictionary best serve its users' needs?) and bringing the user to the dictionary (how can people be made better dictionary users?).

2.1 Motivation for empirical research

Looking at dictionary use from the perspective of language learners, Bogaards (1995) makes the following relevant points:

- learners do not like using a dictionary;
- learners do not know how to use the dictionary;
- dictionaries are too difficult for learners;
- dictionary use hinders reading comprehension.

On the other hand lexicographers, looking at dictionary use from a different point of view, have been known to complain that users do not use the wealth of information that the dictionary offers.

These contrasting perspectives illustrate the dilemma that faces us. The traditional print dictionary cannot be perfect; it can never be ideally suited to each individual user's needs, language skills, world knowledge, intelligence, and his preferred look-up methods. (One clear-cut example of an insoluble problem of this type is the situation of the bi-directional bilingual dictionary, created for users of two languages, in which each entry must meet the needs both of the encoding source-language speaker and the decoding target-language speaker.) Recent years have seen the advent of bigger and more specialized dictionaries for various categories of users (for instance, the various advanced learners' dictionaries of English, Longman's Language Activator for language production, etc.), and the production of electronic dictionaries and other electronic aids. These developments have contributed little to relieve the situation. How can users improve their dictionary skills? And how can dictionaries be made more useful for their users? If this is to come about, much more information is needed about the way in which people actually use their dictionaries.

Technological development has, however, affected the dictionary scene: the dictionary is losing its independence, as it is more and more frequently integrated into larger information systems which can include spelling checkers, grammars, and encyclopedias, among other resources. Professional dictionary users can handle these new types of dictionary reasonably well, and relatively simple questionnaires elicit at least some information about how dictionaries can be improved for such users. These techniques are however suspect at the best of times (people notoriously answer questionnaires in a way which projects an acceptable image of the respondent), and in any case they are not feasible when dealing with non-professional dictionary users, that is, those who are not translators, professional writers, language teachers, academics, lexicographers, etc. More empirical research is needed in this area, to find out exactly the nature of the problems that beset the non-professionals.

2.2 Some general questions

Dictionary use is a subtle problem-solving activity involving many factors. For instance, one cannot easily determine whether, for a given task, the use of a monolingual dictionary is or worse than the use of a bilingual dictionary. The effectiveness of either depends on the kind of lexical item involved, the context it is found in, and the user's knowledge of the language(s) involved.

There are two contradictory reactions to this: leading to two diametrically opposed solutions.

The first course advocates that no information should be withheld from any user; the second course advocates that people should not be offered large quantities of information until they can make use of it, but should rather gain access to facts on a "need to know" basis. Routines should be set up after careful planning, in order to lead people quickly to the information they seek, and to avoid the distraction of large amounts of irrelevant detail.

The relative efficiency of these approaches to information access is highly relevant.

The kind of knowledge that is needed to address the question of which dictionary information can be optimally made available to users. So best dictionary is undoubtedly a human dictionary, in the form of an encyclopaedia, a more knowledgeable parent, teacher, or colleague. The reason for this is that a good dictionary instinctively assesses the situation and tailors the information to the knowledge of the user. The situation is very different for non-professional users, who cannot so easily determine whether, for a given task, the use of a monolingual dictionary is or worse than the use of a bilingual dictionary.

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The relative efficiency of these approaches to information access is highly relevant.
How can one investigate such a subtle and complex activity as dictionary use? We suggest that studies carried out in this technological age should take account of the following points:

- Expert behaviour is a good starting point for devising research questions. When a language learner consults a teacher, the "experts" in this human dictionary consultation scenario are (i) the intelligent language user/learner (an expert human information seeker) and (ii) the good language teacher (an expert human information provider).
- The interaction between seekers and providers of (lexical) information involves many interrelated variables (linguistic, psychological, pedagogical). These must be painstakingly teased out, and tasks devised in which only one factor is variable in any given operation. The emphasis must be on a systematic manipulation of these variables. Thus a one-shot study will not do the job; a series of investigations, planned as a whole, is required, with specific "switching" of the variables listed below.
- Recent technological developments offer researchers in many fields the opportunity to revise and improve their methods: studies in dictionary use may certainly benefit from these new tools, both in ensuring a more objective approach, and in monitoring the activities studied.

2.4 Variables in the use of L2 dictionaries

The following (of which some were adapted from Atkins et al. 1987) may serve as a start-up list of variables in the dictionary use scenario:

1. The user’s "sophistication" (general educational level, reading, writing and inferencing skills)
2. The user’s proficiency in the foreign language.
3. The user’s understanding of dictionary metalanguage.
4. If actual dictionaries are involved, the user’s familiarity with the dictionary or dictionaries being used in the task.
5. The user’s knowledge of the subject matter of the text being understood, translated, read, written about etc. for the purposes of the investigation.
6. The format and type of the specific task (written or spoken; translating or comprehending, etc.), including any time limits imposed.
7. The level of difficulty of the task for the subjects carrying it out.
8. The language (L1 or L2) in which the information is sought or provided.
9. The type of linguistic unit involved (e.g. content or function word), the linguistic information (semantic, grammatical, orthographic, encyclopedic etc.) sought about that unit, and the linguistic and cultural distance between L1 and L2. (Linguistic and cultural distance tends to be reflected in the proportion of lexical items more or less easily "translatable" between the languages involved.)
10. The medium in which the dictionary information is presented (print or electronic).
11. The type of dictionary or dictionary entry used (monolingual, bilingual, "hybrid", etc.);
12. The way in which the information is presented in the dictionary or dictionaries being used: classification, layout, metalinguage, abbreviations, typeface conventions etc.
13. The source of dictionary information available to individuals participating in the investigation: actual dictionaries or "cited" entries; moreover, the latter may either be extracted from a published dictionary or composed for the purposes of the test.

14. The adequacy of coverage of a dictionary vis-a-vis the actual tasks involved (i.e. not the information sought actually is to be found in the dictionary or dictionaries

To summarize the above: variables 1 through 5 relate to the dictionary user; variable task itself, variables 7 through 9 to both the user and the task; and variables 10 through the dictionary material used in the investigation.

2.5 Methodological recommendations

It is suggested that any new investigation might benefit from using the above as a set of factors to be taken into account, if all but one are to be neutralized so that a single variable may be isolated and studied. The following recommendations may be helpful, but constitute a starting point in the detailed planning of dictionary use research:

Subject profiling

- Specify clearly the criteria for subject selection in terms of age, educational level, linguistic knowledge, inferencing skills etc., taking account of variables 1 through 9. Metalinguistic knowledge and inferencing skills can be assessed by tasks devised for this purpose, or estimated on participants' educational or professional experience, etc.
- Specify clearly subjects' L2 proficiency, especially their knowledge of vocabulary or subject terminology pre-tests to check this and selecting subjects accordingly. It is rarely if ever possible to have absolute control over the extent of the subjects' L2 vocabulary. If this is crucial to the test, consider using pseudo-words (of which no subject can possibly preknowledge), as was done for instance in the study by Hulstijn (1993). For a more comprehensive discussion of using artificial linguistic materials in empirical research or learning and language use, see Hulstijn (1997).

Task description

- Clearly specify the task to be performed by the subjects. Subjects must be expected to perform the tasks involved compliantly and about the goals of their reading/writing/translation etc. activity and about the questions to be investigated, inadvertent distractors in the questions, and interpretation of the results.
- Once the tasks are fixed, a pilot study involving every aspect of the final investigation is advisable.
- When coding subjects' responses, conduct separate analyses for each linguistic unit or each type of linguistic unit used for the purposes of the test.

Empirical Research on Dictionary Use
Electronic or print dictionaries may be involved in dictionary use research, and each type has its advantages and disadvantages.

Electronic dictionaries are not familiar objects to many subjects, and their use may interfere with the results of the investigation, unless great care is taken to ensure that the subjects form a homogeneous group along the axis of "computer literacy". However, when it comes to monitoring dictionary use the computerized dictionary offers notable advantages. It can be designed to provide either unrestricted or restricted information (with stepwise access, using a HyperCard-type organization). In this type of program, the computer will unobtrusively keep track of everything the subjects do, including the time devoted to each operation, by making so-called log files, which can later be coded and analyzed; this technique is described, for example, in Hulstijn (1993) and was used in testing the COMPASS dictionaries. Thus, the principal advantage of computer-controlled investigations is that they produce a complete record of subjects' dictionary use, and by unobtrusive on-line monitoring remove much of the danger of the observer affecting the experiment.

The use of print dictionaries may also be recorded in detail, for later analysis. Questionnaires (cf. those shown in Atkins & Varantola's Monitoring Dictionary Use in this volume), and "think-aloud" protocols and other types of self-recording (cf. Varantola's Translators and their Use of Dictionaries in this volume) may be used in an effort to discover the skills and strategies deployed by the person using a print dictionary. If, however, the entry information is to be manipulated for the purpose of the experiment, paper dictionary entries must be created for the investigation, in order to provide only the entries needed for the task being assessed, and this is considerably more cumbersome than producing electronic pseudo-print entries.

Examples of research using both types of dictionary, electronic and especially contrived paper dictionaries, are proposed in the next section.

2.7 Model investigations

In this section two investigations are described in order to illustrate the various points made in the preceding sections. It should be noted, however, that in order to cover as many aspects of the topic as possible, these samples have intentionally been made far too complex to be realistic. Initial investigations should have a much more modest design than those outlined here.

2.7.1 Sample investigation #1

In this example, variables 1, 2, 9 and 11 in the list above are being manipulated, viz. the educational level and L2 proficiency of the subjects, the linguistic units involved, and the type of dictionary used. All other potentially relevant variables must of course be held constant. The model investigation may be summarized as follows:

1 COMPASS: Adapting Bilingual Dictionaries for Online COMPrehension ASSistance, an EC-funded project (LRE 62-080: DG-XIII).
2.7.2 Sample investigation #2

In this investigation, the electronic dictionary offers several alternative routes to the information sought, by means of a stepwise presentation of nested information in response to a request.

Research question

Which access route is best for which user category?

Task

Subjects read a text containing target words calculated to be unfamiliar to them, and are told that they will subsequently be tested on their understanding of the text.

Dictionary information

The relevant dictionary entries are long, offering extensive information (orthographic, etymological, grammatical, semantic information; selection restrictions, authentic examples of use, etc). Three alternatives obtain with regard to access to the dictionary information:

1. The whole entry is simultaneously available (as it is in a normal paper dictionary).
2. The information in the entry is presented in various phases. At each step, users are given two or more options to choose from, and are thus led towards the information they will finally select (whether correct or incorrect), without seeing all the rest of the information which the entry contains.
3. The computer offers preliminary customization by users of the type of information offered, and users work using their own menus.

Subjects

Various subject groups can be envisaged, differing in L2 proficiency and experience in (conventional) dictionary use, ranging from novices to experts.

Hypothesis to be tested

Experts will profit more from the types of access numbered (1) and (3) above, whereas the stepwise mode (2) is better suited to novices.

2.8 Conclusion

Until now, empirical research on dictionary use has been rather haphazard. What is needed is a systematic study of the way in which various variables interact when dictionary users consult a dictionary which contains complex information. The main variables whose interaction should be investigated are:

(a) users' metalinguistic knowledge and inferencing skills;
(b) users' L2 proficiency;
(c) the kind of linguistic information needed from the dictionary;
(d) the language in which the information is sought and provided.

A systematic investigation of the interplay of these variables should help us find an answer to the question of what information a dictionary should optimally provide, taking into account factors (a) through (d). The answer to this question will hopefully lead to some reconciliation of two opposing views in current educational thinking: one, the belief that no information should be withheld (people must be taught to deal with the enormous quantity of information, by helping them to devise strategies which meet their needs), and the other, the belief that information should be withheld temporarily until people concerned are able to understand it and use it correctly (a “need to know” involving leading dictionary users quickly to what they need, with no distractions introd by irrelevant information). Juggling these two scenarios is the unenviable task of lexicographer; understanding what’s going on in their dictionaries and teaching dictionary users to understand this, and adapt to it, falls to the language teacher. Collaborative effort dictionary use research are, we believe, the way forward.

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