

## **Investigating Dictionary Skills and Word Knowledge of Iraqi EFL Students**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to identify the types of dictionary skills and the word knowledge of EFL Iraqi students. The subjects were twenty-six Iraqi EFL 5th grade (science stream) secondary students in the Iraqi school in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The data was gathered via a questionnaire comprising 27- items about their use of the dictionary. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics where frequency counts were tabulated and converted into percentages. The findings revealed that students used dictionaries most frequently to find the meanings of words, or to obtain a translation, and also to check the spelling, and pronunciation. In addition, students mostly preferred electronic bilingual dictionaries to paper dictionaries. The results indicate a very limited use of the dictionary as a tool for language learning, and it is therefore recommended that more attention be directed to training students in effective dictionary skills to enhance their vocabulary learning.

Keywords: dictionary skills, word knowledge, type of dictionaries, Iraqi secondary school students, English as a foreign language (EFL)

## INTRODUCTION

The importance of teaching and learning vocabulary is conveyed succinctly by Wilkins (1972: 111): "Without grammar, little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed". The vital role of vocabulary in language learning is also emphasized by the National Reading Panel in the United States of America (2002) when it urged learners to build a strong vocabulary as it affected their success. According to Birch (2002:130) "Lack of vocabulary is a serious problem for ESL and EFL students in reading independently". Hirai et al. (2010) showed that a good knowledge of the vocabulary of a language facilitates proficiency in the language. Vocabulary acquisition is accepted as an essential aspect of the language teaching and learning process, and viewed as crucial to achieving academic success in ESL and EFL contexts.

The area of vocabulary learning is no longer a neglected aspect. On the contrary, it "...has moved from being a neglected backwater to a position of some importance" (Nacera 2010: 4021). In addition, several researchers have rejected the assumption that learning vocabulary is an arbitrary and simple matter. They confirm that learning vocabulary is a complex and problematic issue confronting learners which might hinder their academic success (Nagy et al. 1987; Allen 1993; Al-Samani 1999; Al-akloby 2001; Birch 2002; Hiebert & Kamil 2005; Klingner 2007; Barone & Xu 2008; Min 2013).

Some of the research in vocabulary learning has been conducted in Arab environments. The studies have investigated the type of word knowledge and the type of dictionaries used (e.g. bilingual vs. monolingual dictionaries) among EFL learners. The findings revealed that students use dictionaries mainly to find the meaning of words, and also to check spelling or pronunciation. For example, Al-Darayseh (2013) revealed that the main reason given by students at Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud University, College of Languages and Translation, Saudi Arabia, for using the dictionary was to find the meanings of words (4.18), followed by spelling (3.70), and then pronunciation. Among the least frequent uses of the dictionary were for finding the stylistic value of a word (colloquial, standard, slang, etc.), followed by what certain abbreviations stand for, and finally, checking if a verb was transitive or intransitive. Similarly, Hamdan & Diab (1999) revealed that students in the University of Jordan mostly used dictionaries for the purpose of finding the meaning, with a much smaller percentage using it to check pronunciation. Al-akloby (2001) also found that the interest in vocabulary among secondary school students in Bishah, Saudi Arabia was limited to only meaning and pronunciation, neglecting the other aspects of knowing a word.

Unlike Arab students, South East Asian students are reported in studies to tend to use dictionaries mainly for pronunciation followed by word meaning. For example, Huang and Eslami (2013) revealed that Chinese (Mandarin), Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, Turkish, and Indonesian students consulted a dictionary most often to find out the pronunciation of a new word and least often to learn the frequency of use and appropriate usage of unknown words.

Therefore, it can be concluded from previous studies that most EFL learners neglect many aspects of learning a word, such as collocations, phrasal verbs, parts of speech, etc. It is likely that their focus on word meaning and pronunciation indicates their lack of familiarity with other aspects of word knowledge.

With regard to the type of dictionaries used, Al-Darayseh (2013) revealed that students in Saudi Arabia mostly tended to use electronic dictionaries rather than paper dictionaries. Bilingual dictionaries were also much more preferred than monolingual dictionaries. Similarly, the Iraqi students in Al-Kubaisy's (1993) study, from the Department of English, College of Education, Baghdad, reported that they rarely consulted a monolingual dictionary and much preferred a bilingual dictionary.

Jordanian EFL learners, however, tend to use monolingual dictionaries either more frequently than bilingual dictionaries or equally frequently (Hamdan & Diab 1999). Similarly, Al-khub (1997) revealed that the majority of Jordanian students tend to use both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries almost with the same frequency.

These results seem to indicate that Jordanian students are more comfortable with using monolingual dictionaries than other students in other countries. In addition, they may have been advised by their teachers about the importance of monolingual dictionaries. Iraqi students, like Saudi Arabian students, are more limited in seeking other aspects of word knowledge and in the type of dictionaries used. They are different from Jordanian students in that they rarely use monolingual dictionaries. It may be inferred that a likely reason why Iraqi students seem to have insufficient knowledge about vocabulary is their dependence on an English-Arabic dictionary instead of a monolingual English dictionary. Learning vocabulary among Iraqi students presents a major challenge, and their lack of adequate vocabulary knowledge appears to be a major obstacle in their language learning process.

It is therefore important to first investigate the present level of dictionary skills among Iraqi students, how much use is made of their dictionaries, what aspects of word knowledge they seek, and the type of dictionaries they use. Such information may provide insights into why only certain aspects of word knowledge interest the students, and why other aspects are neglected so that Iraqi EFL teachers may address the deficiencies in their students' vocabulary learning.

## **AIM OF THE STUDY**

This paper aims to identify the type of dictionary skills used, the extent of the word knowledge, and the type of dictionaries used among 5<sup>th</sup> grade secondary school EFL Iraqi students.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- i. What kind of dictionary skills do EFL Iraqi secondary school students have?
- ii. Which word aspects are they most often concerned with?
- iii. What type of dictionaries do these students usually use to look up these word aspects?

## **METHODOLOGY**

The sample of the study consisted of 27 EFL Iraqi 5<sup>th</sup> grade science stream students in the Iraqi school in Kuala Lumpur, in the month of January 2014, their ages ranging from 16 to 18 years. The English textbook used by these students is "English for Iraq" (2013) by Olivia Johnston and Caroline de Messieres.

This study uses an adapted version of the dictionary skills questionnaire proposed by Al-Darayseh (2013). The questionnaire was considered apt for this study as it was used in Saudi Arabia, where the EFL educational environment is very similar to the Iraqi teaching and learning environment. Therefore, it was convenient and useful to adapt this questionnaire and administer it to Iraqi students.

The questionnaire in its final form consists of two parts. The first part elicits details about students' demographic background and personal details such as gender, age, level of study, and English language proficiency.

The second part consists of 27-items which students respond to on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Always) to 5 (Never). The 27 items are divided into two areas, purpose of using dictionaries (20 items) and the type/s of dictionary used (7 items).

The questionnaire was administered during a class period. The items in the questionnaire were clarified one by one to enable the students to give accurate responses. After 30 minutes the completed questionnaires were collected and the respondents were thanked for their efforts in completing this questionnaire.

The data from the questionnaire was analyzed using descriptive statistics where frequency counts were tabulated and converted into percentages.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings are discussed in response to the three research questions.

### i. Research question one: What kind of dictionary skills do EFL Iraqi secondary school students have?

All the first 20 items with regard to dictionary use indicate the word aspects the respondents looked up in the dictionary. The following table shows the percentages of the word aspects that the respondents used the dictionary for.

TABLE 1 Aspects of word knowledge looked up in the dictionary

No	Items		Always	Usually	Often	Rarely	Never
1	I use a dictionary to look up the meaning of an English word.	No. %	9 35%	13 50%	3 11%	1 4%	0 0%
2	I use a dictionary to look up the multi meanings of an English word.	No. %	4 15%	8 31%	7 27%	6 23%	1 4%
3	I use a dictionary to translate from English to Arabic or vice-versa.	No. %	14 54%	6 24%	3 11%	3 11%	0 0%
4	I use a dictionary to find out the meaning of derived forms.	No. %	0 0%	1 4%	9 35%	12 46%	4 15%
5	I use a dictionary to find an English definition of a word.	No. %	4 15%	7 27%	7 27%	5 19%	3 11%
6	I use a dictionary to find out the pronunciation of an English word.	No. %	6 23%	10 38%	2 8%	5 19%	3 11%
7	I use a dictionary to learn the differences between British and American English.	No. %	1 4%	0 0%	5 19%	8 31%	12 46%
8	I use dictionary to find out how to break an English word into syllables.	No. %	1 4%	1 4%	10 38%	6 23%	8 31%
9	I use a dictionary to find out synonyms and antonyms of an English word.	No. %	1 4%	9 34%	8 31%	7 27%	1 4%

10	I use a dictionary to check the spelling of an English word.	No.	6	11	4	3	2
		%	23%	42%	15%	11%	8%
11	I use a dictionary to identify the part of speech of an English word.	No.	2	2	11	7	4
		%	8%	8%	42%	27%	15%
12	I use a dictionary to find out the irregular plural forms of some English nouns.	No.	2	6	6	7	5
		%	8%	23%	23%	26%	19%
13	I use a dictionary to find out the origin of certain words.	No.	0	8	4	8	6
		%	0%	31%	15%	31%	23%
14	I use a dictionary to find out what certain abbreviations stand for.	No.	1	5	6	9	5
		%	4%	19%	23%	35%	19%
15	I use a dictionary to look up the collocation of words.	No.	0	6	7	3	10
		%	0%	23%	27%	11%	38%
16	I use a dictionary to learn how to use the word from the example sentences.	No.	0	2	11	7	6
		%	0%	8%	42%	27%	23%
17	I use a dictionary to look for inflected forms.	No.	1	9	5	1	10
		%	4%	35%	19%	4%	38%
18	I use a dictionary to look up if a word is countable or uncountable.	No.	0	5	6	4	11
		%	0%	19%	23%	15%	42%
19	I use a dictionary to look up the meaning of English idioms, expressions, proverbs, etc.	No.	4	4	6	8	4
		%	15%	15%	23%	31%	15%
20	I use a dictionary to look up the meaning of English phrasal verbs.	No.	1	3	5	11	6
		%	4%	11%	19%	42%	24%

The table shows that this group of EFL Iraqi students used the dictionary to look up different aspects of word knowledge to varying degrees. The results range from 85%, the highest percentage for the item, "I use a dictionary to look up the meaning of an English word", to one of the lowest percentages (4%) for both "I use a dictionary to know the differences between British and American English" and I use a dictionary to find out the meaning of derived forms".

These results echo those of several studies which have been conducted in the Arabic-speaking world (Al-Darayseh 2013; Hamdan & Diab 1999; Al-akloby 2001). All these studies showed that Jordanian and Saudi Arabian students used the dictionary mainly to find the meaning of unknown words. Iraqi students too used the dictionary mainly to find out the meaning of unknown words or to translate a whole paragraph. This result could indicate that Iraqi students lack familiarity with other aspects of word knowledge, and this could explain a weakness in their approach to language learning.

## ii. Research question two: Which word aspects are they most often concerned with?

The following table shows the percentages of word aspects most frequently looked up by these students.

TABLE 2 Word aspects most frequently looked up in the dictionary

No	Items	Always	Usually	No of students	Percentages
1	I use a dictionary to look up the meaning of an English word.	9	13	22	85%
3	I use a dictionary to translate from English to Arabic or vice-versa.	14	6	20	77%
10	I use a dictionary to check the spelling of an English word.	6	11	17	65%
6	I use a dictionary to find out the pronunciation of an English word.	6	10	16	61%

The above table shows that most of the students consulted dictionaries for the purpose of finding the meaning of a word (85%), or a translation (77%), checking spelling (65%), and pronunciation (61%). These results could be seen as consequences of methods of teaching such as the grammar translation and audio lingual methods which are still widely practiced by teachers. These methods would influence students to focus on translation and pronunciation more than on other aspects of word knowledge. According to Sabah (2011), Iraqi students have been observed to translate English words into their native language when trying to understand a reading text. Students find it difficult or sometimes impossible to understand an English text without first translating the words from English into Arabic (ibid).

These current research results seem to resonate with those of Al-Darayseh's (2013), Hamdan & Diab's (1999) and Al-akloby's (2001) in that students utilized dictionaries most frequently to find the meaning, spelling and pronunciation of words. These four word aspects seem to be the more frequent ones that Arab students use the dictionary to learn about.

Al-Darayseh (2013) revealed that students at Al-Imam Mohammad Bin Saud University, Saudi Arabia utilized the dictionary most frequently to find the meaning of a word ( $m=4.18$ ), to check spelling ( $m=3.70$ ), and to check pronunciation ( $m=3.47$ ). Similarly, Hamdan & Diab (1999) revealed that 85% of students in the University of Jordan mostly used the dictionary to find word meanings, 5% used it to check pronunciation of words, and 10% used it to find both meaning and pronunciation together. In addition, Al-akloby's results (2001) confirmed that among secondary school students in Bishah, Saudi Arabia, vocabulary aspects were limited to pronunciation and meaning, and other aspects of word knowledge were neglected. Different results, however, were found by Noorizah Mohd. Noor and Zaini Amir (2012) in that, out of 35 post graduate students at the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), 23 students indicated the highest frequency of using the dictionary to find different uses of a word, followed by 19 students who focused on finding the

meaning of a word, and 18 students who looked up the dictionary to learn the pronunciation of a word.

As for the least frequent use of the dictionary in expanding word knowledge, the following table shows the word aspects least frequently looked up among the students in this study.

TABLE 3 Word aspects least frequently looked up in a dictionary

No	Items	Rarely	Never	No of students	Percentages
20	I use a dictionary to look up the meaning of English phrasal verbs.	11	6	17	65%
4	I use a dictionary to find out the meaning of derived forms.	12	4	16	61%
18	I use a dictionary to look up if a noun is countable or uncountable.	4	11	15	58%
8	I use a dictionary to find how to break an English word into syllables.	6	8	15	58%
13	I use a dictionary to find out the origin of certain words.	8	6	14	54%
15	I use a dictionary to look up the collocations of a word.	3	10	13	50%
16	I use a dictionary to learn how to use a word from the given example sentences.	7	6	13	50%

The above table shows that the dictionary skills least frequently used were those related to looking up the meaning of English phrasal verbs (65%); finding the meaning of derived forms (61%); looking up if a noun is countable or uncountable (58%); finding how to break up an English word into syllables, and finding out the origin of certain words (both 54%); looking up the collocation of words and learning from the given example sentences (both 50%). These percentages show that a large number of these students rarely or never used the dictionary to learn these aspects of word knowledge.

It may be inferred that these students were not aware of the importance of dictionary skills or other aspects of word knowledge beyond meaning and pronunciation. They seemed to be ignorant of the dictionary as a useful tool to enhance their learning of vocabulary. Even in Noorizah Mohd. Noor & Zaini Amir (2012)'s study of 35 UKM postgraduate students, it was found that 46% of the respondents were unsure of what collocation was. These results suggest that students do need to be trained in dictionary skills to learn the other aspects of word knowledge.

### iii. Research question three: What type of dictionaries do these students usually use to look up these word aspects?

In the following table, dictionaries are divided into two main forms: printed and electronic dictionaries. Among both these two forms, there are four types of dictionaries: bilingual,

monolingual, bilingualized, or specialized dictionaries. The results of the second section of the questionnaire show that while the students used all these types of dictionaries, they were used at different levels. The following table shows how frequently each type of dictionary was used by these students.

TABLE 4 Types of dictionaries used

NO	ITEMS	SCALE					
		Always	Usually	Often	Rarely	Never	
21.	I prefer to use bilingual paper dictionaries (English-Arabic or Arabic-English).	No.	7	3	5	6	5
		%	27%	11%	19%	23%	19%
22.	I prefer to use bilingual electronic dictionaries (English/Arabic or Arabic/English).	No.	14	5	3	1	3
		%	54%	19%	11%	4%	11%
23.	I prefer to use monolingual paper dictionaries (English/English)	No.	1	2	9	7	7
		%	4%	8%	34%	27%	27%
24.	I prefer to use monolingual electronic dictionaries (English/English).	No.	2	7	7	4	6
		%	8%	27%	27%	15%	23%
25.	I prefer to use bilingualized paper dictionaries (English/English/Arabic).	No.	4	4	4	6	8
		%	15%	15%	15%	23%	31%
26.	I prefer to use bilingualized electronic dictionaries (English/English/Arabic).	No.	5	8	7	3	3
		%	19%	31%	27%	11%	11%
27.	I prefer to use specialized dictionaries.	No.	0	1	4	14	7
		%	0%	4%	15%	54%	27%

The results show that students used different types of dictionaries, from a high percentage (73%) indicating, "I prefer to use bilingual electronic dictionaries (English-Arabic or Arabic-English)" to a low percentage (4%) indicating, "I prefer to use specialized dictionaries".

Generally, these results show that students largely preferred electronic dictionaries to paper dictionaries. More specifically, these students reported a preference for bilingual and bilingualized electronic dictionaries.

That electronic dictionaries were the most frequently used is not surprising, especially since electronic dictionaries are easily and quickly accessed as they are available on every one's mobile phone, laptop, iPod and other similar electronic devices. On the other hand, both electronic and paper monolingual dictionaries are less frequently used as they are likely to be less readily available and hence less accessible. In addition, they are considered inconvenient and more time-consuming compared to the ease with which words are searched and found on electronic dictionaries.

These students utilized electronic dictionaries either to find the meaning of the target word or to check how it is pronounced or spelled. The procedure involved in the dictionary skills for looking up these three or four aspects of word knowledge is perceived to be an easy and simple task. This might explain why these students reported their use of a dictionary mostly for finding the



meaning of words, or a translation, for checking pronunciation and spelling. Therefore, other aspects of word knowledge that require more time and effort seem to be reported as the least frequently looked up by these students. In addition, these students might not have adequate knowledge to understand these aspects of word knowledge from the information given in the dictionary.

## CONCLUSION

In the light of the results obtained in this study, it may be concluded that the dictionary skills of the Iraqi students in this study are limited to very basic aspects of word knowledge.

The Iraqi students applied their dictionary skills mainly for finding the meaning of a word or getting a translation, and for checking spelling and pronunciation. Far fewer students applied dictionary skills to find out the meaning of derived forms, to check if a noun was countable or uncountable, to find how to break up an English word into syllables, to find out the origin of certain words, and to look up the collocation of words and to learn from the example sentences.

As for the type of dictionaries used, most students used bilingual electronic dictionaries (English-Arabic or Arabic-English) rather than specialized dictionaries. This is mainly because the former type of dictionary affords ease of access and convenience, and is sufficient for a quick check on meaning or translation. However, students may benefit from getting more information about words if they knew what else there was to know about words, and if they were better trained in seeking such information from other types of dictionaries.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

One simple and important recommendation would be that training in dictionary skills should become part of the EFL syllabus in Iraqi secondary schools. Students need to be familiar with the advantages of using the paper dictionary too as it is an important and rich resource in language learning. In particular, the use of monolingual dictionaries should be encouraged as greater exposure to English would help enhance not only vocabulary but also general language use. Bilingual dictionaries tend to create dependence on using translation as a method of learning English. Generally, dictionary skills are also important in encouraging autonomous learning (Nation 2001; Yanping 2005; Nessel 2008).

Further research needs to be devoted to exploring effective methods of vocabulary learning and teaching in Iraqi contexts.

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