Does an Assigned Task Result in Better Retention of Words? : Two Empirical Studies on Hand-held Electronic Dictionaries

Does an Assigned Task Result in Better Retention of Words? : Two Empirical Studies on Hand-held Electronic Dictionaries*

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This article reports on two empirical studies concerning the use of hand-held electronic dictionaries(ED). The main purposes of the studies were to investigate whether an assigned task facilitates learner's retention of searched words in using ED, and an assigned task affects learner's impression of the ED. In the studies, we found that assigning a task 1) did not facilitate the retention of the looked-up word, and 2) did not change the subjects' evaluation of the ED as a learning tool. We also confirmed that retrieval strategies varied in accordance with the EFL proficiency levels of the learners. Based on these findings, this article concludes that future studies on the use of ED should be focused, not on the tasks assigned by educators, but on the retrieval strategies used by learners.

1. Introduction

Up until recently, no one could visualize how technology provided greater utility to learners' dictionaries. The advent of a hand-held electronic dictionary (henceforth ED) has brought about considerable changes in the Japanese EFL context. The number of ED users in universities, colleges, and even in high schools has rapidly increased (Nakamura, 2003). The ED market has grown approximately fourfold in the last five years (Yagi, 2004).

Recently, some empirical studies have been compared learners' ED look-up behavior with that of the conventional printed dictionary (henceforth PD) (e.g., Hattori, 2003; Koyama & Takeuchi, 2003; Osaki, Ochiai, Iso, & Aizawa, 2003; Shizuka, 2003; Tsuchimochi, 2003). These studies investigated mainly i) time for word retrieval, ii) the number of target words retained, iii) the accuracy of selecting an L1 equivalent, and iv) the learners' impressions of the dictionaries. Shizuka (2003) insisted that the ED could lower the "consultation trigger point" (Aust, Kelley, & Roby, 1993)[1], thereby offering more frequent and efficient access to target words, although Osaki et al. (2003) maintained that the use of ED did not guarantee better EFL learning.

It should be noted that most of these studies, whether they cast doubt on the advantage of

ED or not, pointed out the crucial difference in the interface design between the ED and PD[2]. The ED only provides learners with fragmentary information about the target words at a time in a "hierarchical structure" due to the limitations of the screen display. In contrast, the PD offers them not only the headwords and their definitions but also examples and information on usages in a "horizontal display" on the same page. Focusing on this difference in data display between ED and PD, Koyama and Takeuchi (2004) investigated EFL learners' searching behavior and their impressions of the dictionaries. Their study was designed to make learners intentionally scan the different layers of the ED to find information relevant to the target words, while there was no need to see any other pages when using a PD. The findings in their study were: 1) although the differences in the two types of dictionaries did not seem to affect a reduction in search time, 2) they influenced the retention of words searched, and 3) the subjects considered that a longer process to obtain the necessary information in a dictionary might result in the better retention of looked-up words. Consequently, they concluded that "arduous" work (Keller, 1987) through the use of a PD seemed to result in better retention.[3] This interpretation is in accordance with the "*mental effort*" hypothesis (Hulstijn, 1992), which was originated from psychological literature on "*depth of processing*" (Craik & Lockhart, 1972).

The question we must consider here is how we can guarantee better retention when using an ED, with which we can quickly obtain relevant information without any "arduous" effort. In other words, how can we induce learners' "*mental effort*" in the use of ED? Considering a rapid growth in the number of ED users in Japan, this issue needs to be extensively examined.

2. Research Questions

To answer the above question, we directed our attention to the "task-induced involvement load hypothesis" (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). They suggested that the retention of words depends on how EFL learners deal with newly encountered words, and thus, the assigned task in learning new vocabulary makes learners secure higher retention. This concept was applied to several studies concerning vocabulary learning by the use of dictionaries (e.g., Hill & Laufer, 2003; Laufer & Levitzky-Aviad, 2003). These studies, therefore, led us to the hypothesis that if an assigned task can deepen mental processing when consulting an ED, the result should be improved retention.

Based on this hypothesis, we conducted two studies to explore the possibility of the task-induced effect in the use of ED. The following research questions are proposed:

1) Can an assigned task facilitate learner's retention of searched words when using an ED? ; and
2) Does an assigned task affect the learner's impression of the ED?

3. Experiment 1

3.1 Purposes

The purposes of this experiment were: 1) to examine the task-induced effect on learners' retention of looked-up words in using ED, and 2) to assess how the assigned task affects learners' impressions of the ED.

3.2 Participants and Materials

The first experiment was conducted with 34 second-year students at a junior college located in Osaka. From the result of a 45-item cloze test given to them in advance, they were considered to be false beginners. Their daily dictionary use was determined by a questionnaire beforehand.

A reading text was selected from a written examination of the pre-2nd grade test of STEP (The Society for Testing English Proficiency, Inc.). This text consisted of 225 words and contained several words unfamiliar to the subjects in the present study. Its Flesch Reading Ease was 53.1 and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level was 10.1, which is considered to be a reasonable level for the subjects, based on our teaching experience.

As a hand-held electronic dictionary, a CASIO EX-word XD-R9000 was chosen in the present study. This ED contains the same number of headwords, definitions, and examples as *Taishukan's Genius English-Japanese Dictionary* (3rd edition), which is one of the most popular English-Japanese dictionaries.

3.3 Procedure

On the basis of the results of the cloze test and the questionnaire, the subjects were divided into two groups: the "task" group vs. the "no task" group, both groups having the same average proficiency (Mann-Whitney $U = 143.500$, ns). Before the experiment, all the subjects were given sufficient time to get used to using this particular ED. The procedure of the experiment is summarized in Figure 1.

First, to force the subjects to comprehend the text, they were asked to read and to summarize it in Japanese without a dictionary. Second, they were given an ED and a word definition test (See Appendix 1). This test was composed of six lines taken from the text, and each line included one target word, which was considered to be unfamiliar to our subjects. They were instructed to look up these words in the ED and jot down the most appropriate L1 equivalent to the context. In this session, the "task" group was additionally asked to locate the relevant examples to the context and extract them from the ED. This task was intended to deepen the subjects' mental processing. Third, a 23-item questionnaire was distributed to each

group to investigate how their impressions of the ED varied according to the task (See Appendix 2).

One week later, to measure the subjects' retention of words that they had looked up in the word definition test, two tests were administered without advanced notice. In the first test ("Recall test"), they were asked to spell out six words they had consulted a week before. As the second test, the same text they had read was used ("Recognition test"), and they were instructed to circle the words they had actually looked up in the ED seven days before (See Appendix 3).
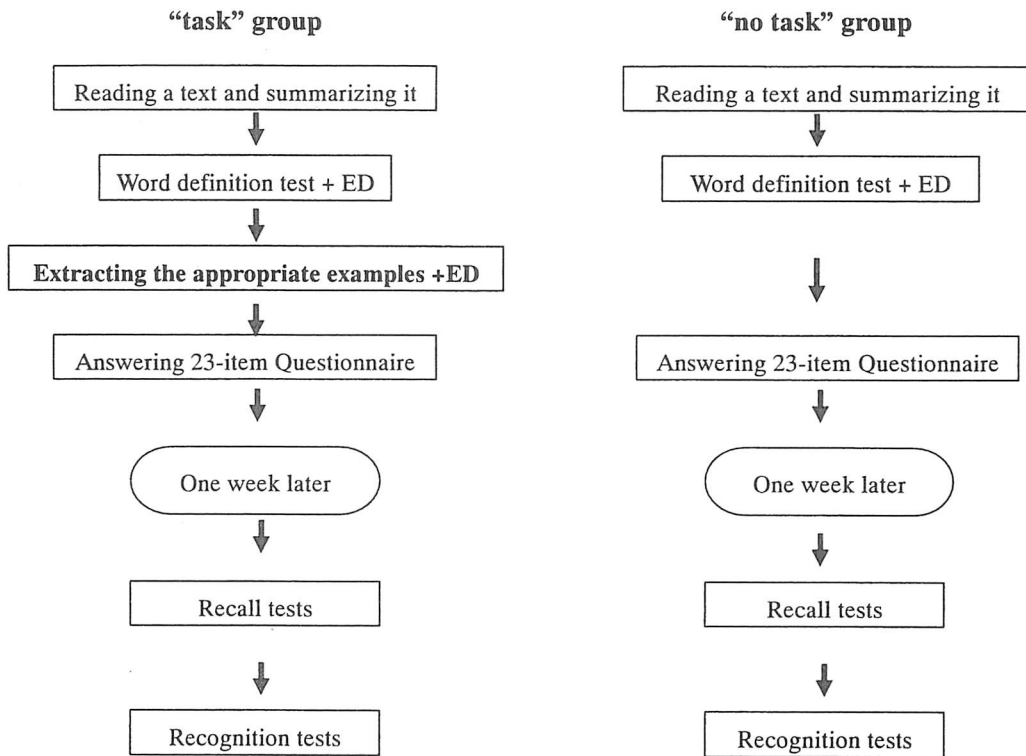

Figure 1. Procedure of the Experiment

3.4 Results

Table 2 displays the means and the SDs of the subjects' scores between the "no task" and the "task" groups.

"Word Definitions" in the table indicates that the number of the correct answers in the word definition test. One point was given to each correct answer when the subjects could jot down the most appropriate L1 equivalent to the context, and thus the full mark was six. "Rate of

Recall" and "Rate of Recognition" were calculated by dividing the number of the words the subjects could recall or recognize by six (i.e., the number of the designated words in the definition test). In this experiment, no one could recall the words they had consulted a week before.

Table 2. Means and SDs of the Two Groups

	Group	n	M	SD
Word Definitions	No Task	17	4.24	1.15
	Task	17	3.94	1.35
Rate of Recall (%)	No Task	17	0.00	0.00
	Task	17	0.00	0.00
Rate of Recognition (%)	No Task	17	.26	.20
	Task	17	.32	.29

The results of statistical analysis were shown in Table 3. Since the number of the subjects was small, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U-test was conducted (Siegel & Castellan, Jr., 1988). As the table shows, there are no significant differences between both groups in terms of "Word Definitions", "Rate of Recall", and "Rate of Recognition". This indicates that, contrary to our expectations, the task of locating the examples relevant to the context and extracting them from the ED, which was assigned to the subjects in using ED did not have beneficial effect on subjects' retention of searched words, nor on their choosing of the appropriate meanings to the context.

Table 3. Results of Statistical Analysis

	Word Definitions	Rate of Recall	Rate of Recognition
U	124.0	144.5	133.5

All values are n.s.

In the 23-item questionnaire, the subjects rated their impressions of the ED on a scale of one to five. The reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was comparatively high (Cronbach's alpha = .86). Comparing the mean values of each item, almost no marked differences were observed between the "task" and the "no task" groups.

Since the number of the subjects or the number of the designated words was not sufficiently large to prove the hypotheses in the first experiment, Experiment 2 thus was

conducted to replicate the findings above under more rigorous conditions.

4. Experiment 2

4.1 Purpose

The purpose of Experiment 2 was to replicate Experiment 1 with a larger population under more rigorous conditions. For this purpose, the same task as in the previous study was assigned to subjects who had a different proficiency level from those of the first study. Additionally, the number of the designated words was increased for more reliable data collection.

4.2 Participants and Materials

The second experiment was conducted with 61 first-year students, majoring in economics or commerce at a university located in Osaka. The cloze test used in the pilot study was administered to the subjects in advance. According to the result, the English proficiency level of the subjects in this experiment was significantly higher than that of the first study ($t = 4.879, p < .001$). The result of a questionnaire, which asked their daily dictionary use, showed that approximately half of them used ED in their daily study.

As reading material, a chapter was selected from an English textbook designed for college students. This chapter consisted of 463 words and contained several words and phrases unfamiliar to the subjects. Its Flesch Reading Ease was 70.4 and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level was 6.8, both of which were regarded as a reasonable level for the subjects. The number of designated words in a word definition test was increased to ten (See Appendix 4). The same ED as had been used in Experiment 1 was used in the second experiment.

4.3 Procedure

Subjects were divided into two groups ("no task" and "with task") in the same manner that was used in Experiment 1. The subjects who use ED every day were equally included in each group. The same procedure was introduced as in the first study (See Figure 1).

4.4 Results

Table 4 represents a comparison of the mean values and SDs between the "no task" and the "task" groups. The same criterion as the first study was adopted for scoring. The results of statistical analysis are shown in Table 5. The t-values revealed that a significant difference existed in "Word Definitions" between "no task" and "task" groups at $p < .05$. However, no significant differences were found in respect of either "Rate of Recall" or "Rate of Recognition". The results indicate that the assigned task did not positively affect the subjects' retention of the

searched words, as was found in the first study. Nevertheless, it helped the subjects choose appropriate L1 equivalents to the context from the ED.

Table 4. Means and SDs of the Two Groups

	Group	n	M	SD
Word Definitions	No Task	35	8.00	1.14
	Task	26	8.62	1.10
Rate of Recall (%)	No Task	35	.40	.65
	Task	26	.23	.59
Rate of Recognition (%)	No Task	35	4.11	1.94
	Task	26	4.27	2.33

Table 5. Results of Statistical Analysis

	t	df
Word Definitions	-2.120*	59
Rate of Recall	1.047	59
Rate of Recognition	-.284	59
		$*p < .05$

In the 23-item questionnaire, in which the subjects rated their impressions of the ED on a scale of one to five, the reliability coefficient of this questionnaire was relatively high (Cronbach's alpha = .82). Comparing the mean values of each item, no significant difference between two groups was found.[4]

Favorable responses to the ED in both groups were observed as a whole, despite of the fact that the "task" group had the additional work. Actually, the highest scores in each group were found on item (16) *"This dictionary was useful for my studies."* ("task" group = 3.81; "no task" group = 3.94). In other words, the subjects in both groups showed a preference for the ED irrespective of their daily dictionary use. This finding was also supported by the result that the evaluation of item (14) *"It was so much troublesome for me to find the required information with this dictionary"* from not only the "task" group but also the "no task" group was comparatively low, as compared with other items ("task" group = 2.42; "no task" group = 2.40).

Putting it briefly, the subjects of both groups used the ED effectively, whether they were assigned the task or not.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The results derived from the two experiments described above reveals the following. First, the results of the recall and recognition tests in two experiments revealed that the assigned task, contrary to our expectations, did not help retention of the looked-up words. This might indicates that the task in the present study, which was locating the appropriate examples to the context and extracting them from the ED, was not a sufficiently heavy mental processing load for the subjects. One possible explanation for the finding is that the task did not require the subjects to make a great deal of effort owing to a superior search function of ED. This interpretation is also corroborated by the answers to item (14) of the 23-questionnaire, in which neither group considered that looking up words in using ED was troublesome or arduous work.

Second, from the analysis of the questionnaire in Experiments 1 and 2, the subjects' impressions of the ED did not seem to vary in accordance with the assigned task. In fact, the answers in both experiments indicated their preferences for the ED, whether they performed the task or not.

Third, Experiment 2 revealed that the "task" group obtained the significantly higher score in the word definition test than the "no task" group did, while no difference was found between both groups in Experiment 1. These results indicate that the "task" group in the second experiment obtained information relevant to the context by looking up the examples of the target words, and thus they could choose the appropriate meanings from the dictionary. Nevertheless, we could not find such an effect in the "task" group in Experiment 1, despite the fact that the same kind of task as in Experiment 2 was assigned. Since the only difference between two experiments was the subjects' proficiency, the results suggested that learners with lower proficiency could not derive helpful information on the target words from dictionaries.

To summarize the major findings described above, the superior search function of ED appears to overcome the task which is generally regarded as arduous or troublesome. However, we found that learners' proficiency is somewhat related to retrieval strategies, since the learners with low proficiency could not derive appropriate meanings to the context from the ED. According to Lantolf, Labarca, and Tuinder (1985), the different retrieval strategies exist in different proficiency levels. They revealed that the students of beginning and intermediate levels appeared to favor a search strategy based on lexical form, while advanced students were able to employ a more successful semantic-based strategy. Although their study was conducted in using printed dictionaries, a certain similarity can be found between their findings and ours. As was indicated by the many researchers in this field (e.g., Nation, 2001; Koyama, 2004; Scholfield, 1982, 1997), acquiring the strategies for dictionary use is considered to be indispensable for better EFL learning. Thus, the future direction of our study will be to find effective strategies for

ED use in accordance with learners' proficiency levels.

Notes

1. Aust, Kelley, and Roby (1993) made a comparison between hyper-reference and conventional paper dictionaries in FL learning. They reported, based on the results, readers consulted hyper-references much more frequently than comparable paper references because hyper-references appear to lower the "consultation trigger point".
2. The term "interface design" is defined as "a point of contact between a human and a device" in the present study.
3. Keller (1987) claimed that "frequent need to thumb through the dictionary is arguably the most arduous part of leaning a foreign language."
4. No item exceeded the pre-set alpha level of .002 in the multiple t-tests. This adjusted alpha level was calculated according to a Bonferroni adjustment.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

The text used in Experiment 1

問2　本文中で使われている次の単語（下線部①〜⑥）の意味として、もっとも適切と考えられる意味を電子辞書で確認し、その意味を日本語で書きなさい。また、本文中と同じ意味で使われている用例を電子辞書からひとつ選び、その用例を一つ英語のまま抜き出しなさい。

[Translation: Question 2. For the following words used in the text (underlined words 1-6), find the most appropriate meaning using your electronic dictionary and write the meaning in Japanese. Next, find an example sentence with the same meaning and write it in English.]

①range

They ranged[①] over most of Asia, from the shores of the Caspian Sea east into Siberia, and all the way south to Indonesia.

意味[meaning]

用例[example]

②species

But of the original eight species[②] of tiger, only five remain alive today.

意味

用例

③fuel

The forests where the tigers live and hunt have been cut down to make farmland and to obtain wood for fuel[③].

意味

用例

④preserve

Since humans are responsible for the tragic situation of these noble animals, it is up to us to preserve[④]and protect the few wild tigers that are left.

意味

用例

⑤urgent

Two urgent[⑤]tasks face us now.

意味

用例

⑥fund

Private organizations must work together with national governments to increase public interest and raise funds[⑥]for protection.

意味

用例

"Save the Tiger" from the written examination of the pre-2nd grade test of STEP, 1998

Appendix 2

23-item Questionnaire

	Questionnaire Items
1.	This dictionary provided me with a good deal of information at first sight.
2.	I saw further information besides the target word in this dictionary.
3.	I could quickly find the target words of this experiment with this dictionary.
4.	I felt that the words I looked up in this dictionary were easily retained.
5.	It was easy for me to scan information about the target word.
6.	I could acquire information relative to the target word with this dictionary.
7.	I could easily get necessary usage examples to understand the meaning of the target word in this dictionary.
8.	This dictionary was easy to use.
9.	I felt I needed experience in using this dictionary.
10.	This dictionary was convenient for comparing the meanings of more than two words.
11.	I could use this dictionary for a long time.
12.	I could easily get suitable meaning after finding the target word in this dictionary.
13.	I enjoyed using this dictionary.
14.	It was so much troublesome for me to find the required information with this dictionary.
15.	I feel that using this dictionary was quite an art.
16.	This dictionary was useful for my studies.
17.	I would like to use this dictionary again when participating in this experiment.
18.	I feel like my English proficiency will be advanced in using this dictionary.
19.	I feel as if I were lost when using this dictionary.
20.	I would like to recommend this dictionary to my friends.
21.	This dictionary is appropriate for beginners when learning English at a primary or lower secondary school.
22.	This dictionary is easy to use at any time and any place.
23.	This dictionary is reliable.

Translation Ours

Appendix 3

The recognition test used in Experiment 1

以下の書かれた英文の中から、あなたが1週間前に電子辞書で、「実際に引いた単語」を○で囲んでください。

[Translation: In the text below, find the words you actually looked up one week before, and circle them.]

It is believed that there were over 100,000 tigers in the world at the beginning of the 20th century. They ranged over most of Asia, from the shores of the Caspian Sea east into Siberia, and all the way south to Indonesia. But of the original eight species of tiger, only five remain alive today. It is now

thought that the number of tigers in the wild ranges from a low of 5,000 to a maximum of 7,000.

The major threat to the tiger has come from human beings. The forests where the tigers live and hunt have been cut down to make farmland and to obtain wood for fuel. Illegal hunters collect tiger bones, organs, and other body parts for traditional medicines, even though there is no scientific proof of any benefits.

Since humans are responsible for the tragic situation of these noble animals, it is up to us to preserve and protect the few wild tigers that are left. Two urgent tasks face us now. One is creating special areas for the tigers to live. The other is making sure those areas are defended from illegal hunters. Private organizations must work together with national governments to increase public interest and raise funds for protection. If a determined effort is made now, there may still be hope for the long-term survival of the tiger.

Appendix 4

The word definition test used in Experiment 2

本文中で使われている次の語句（下線部①〜⑩）の意味として、最も適切と考えられるものを与えられた辞書で確認し、本文にそった意味を日本語で書きなさい。また、本文中と同じ意味で使われている例文（例句）を与えられた辞書からひとつ選び、その例文（例句）を一つ英語のまま抜き出しなさい。

[Translation: Look up the underlined words in the text, numbered 1-10, using the dictionary provided to you and then write the most suitable meaning for the usage of the word in the text on this sheet. Next, find an example sentence that uses the word in the same way and write the English sentence in the space provided.]

When I go to Chinatown for breakfast with my parents or my relatives from Hong Kong, we are ushered[①] to the best table, offered a variety of special dishes and treated to warm smiles and solicitous service by the dim sum ladies.

You might think that because I am Chinese — with the standard straight hair, yellow skin and slanted eyes — I would have an inside track in Chinatown. But there are hundreds of men and women like me in New York who actually[②] get short shrift there because we're ABC's, American-born Chinese, and we don't speak Cantonese.

Whether it's an outdoor market, a stationery store, a bakery or a restaurant, the routine is always the same. ABC's are initially greeted with a smile and a friendly word in Cantonese. Then, when it's discovered that we don't understand, the word, smile and any pretense[③] of friendliness disappear.

It can be embarrassing[④]. One time, a dim sum lady asked me something after she had chatted with my father. "She doesn't speak Cantonese," my father said. The woman turned scarlet. "What, you never taught her?!" she asked indignantly.

Actually, when I was little, my parents enrolled me in a Saturday morning private school to learn Chinese language and culture. I dropped out when I was 7, after a year or two. I had better things to do on a weekend — mainly to play with my American friends. I wanted nothing more than to be like them, and that's what I became. Now in Chinatown, I pay the price[⑤].

Tourists get better treatment than ABC's. Ladies in cheepows bow to them. Waiters fill teapots without being asked. Managers make polite chit-chat, asking how they like Chinatown. Tourists have an <u>excuse</u>[6] for not knowing Cantonese.

Well, nobody asked, but I love Chinatown — the smells of fried noodles, the hurly-burly, the feeling of being in another world that is like a little piece of my heritage. I don't think I <u>deserve</u>[7] the treatment I receive there.

A Chinatown friend says I should be more understanding. "They live in tiny rooms, in <u>poverty</u>[8]," she said. "They have very little to be proud about except this language no one else understands. You're either in or out."

To them, I'm just another Americanized young person, a failure, a <u>traitor</u>[9]. Sure I understand, but most of the time I'm just plain angry. It's not that I want to be accepted, just respected.

Whenever my downtown ABC friends and I want Chinese food without the <u>insults</u>[10], we go to a take-out place near our New York University dorm. The lo mein is dry and the vegetables are watery, but the cook gives us extra fortune cookies and orange slices and jokes with us in English. He makes us feel at home. Of course, he is an ABC, too.

<div align="right">L. C. Smith & N.N. Mare (2000), Topics for Today Book 2, 松柏社</div>