



**Faculty of Cognitive Sciences and Human
Development**

**A CASE STUDY ON THE USE OF DICTIONARY AS A STRATEGY FOR
LEARNING ENGLISH VOCABULARY**

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**A Graduation Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
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SUPERVISOR'S APPROVAL SHEET

A research project entitled '**A case study on the use of dictionary as a strategy for learning the English vocabulary**' was prepared by Wilson Seling Jalong and submitted to the Centre for Language Studies(CLS) Universiti Malaysia Sarawak in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Science with Honours (English as A Second Language/ESL)

It is hereby confirmed that the student has done all the necessary amendments of the project for acceptance.

(Signature of supervisor)

Yvonne Michelle Campbell
(Name of supervisor)

Date: _____

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BPPDP = Bahagian Penyelidikan dan Perancangan Dasar Pendidikan

MOE = Ministry of Education, Malaysia

FSKPM= Fakulti Sains Kognitif dan Pembangunan Manusia(Faculty of Cognitive Science and Human Development)

PMR = Penilaian Menengah Rendah(Lower Secondary Assessment)

SMK = Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan(Government Secondary School)

SPSS = Statistical Package for Social Science

JPNS = Jabatan Pendidikan Negeri Sarawak (Department of Education, Sarawak)

ABSTRACT

A case study on the use of dictionary as a strategy for learning English vocabulary

Wilson Seling Jalong

This case study attempts to examine how students actually use the English dictionary, as well as their perceptions concerning dictionary use for learning vocabulary, factors that motivate them to learn vocabulary through the dictionary, and problems that students encounter in using the print dictionary. Data from respondents was collected using questionnaires as the main instrument. A semi-structured interview was also conducted for the purpose of eliciting more information from respondents. The samples used in this study were 201 Form Four students of a secondary school in Kuching who were selected out of 14 classes by cluster random sampling method. Analysis of the data allows us to see how students actually use their dictionary, how they perceive the use of dictionary for vocabulary learning, factors that motivate them to learn vocabulary through the dictionary, and the problems students encounter in using the dictionary. Based on the finding, it shows that students are not too dependent on the dictionary for new word meanings but only do so after trying to deduce the meaning of the word from context. It also indicates that students are positive towards the use of dictionary for learning vocabulary. The most prominent factor that seems to influence students' preference of using the dictionary for learning the vocabulary is from parents. The finding also reveals that a great majority of respondents acknowledge the fact that some word used in the dictionary to define a new word are found to be more difficult than the word itself.

ABSTRAK

Satu kajian kes tentang penggunaan kamus Bahasa Inggeris sebagai satu strategi untuk mempelajari perbendaharaan kata Bahasa Inggeris

Wilson Seling Jalong

Kajian kes ini bertujuan untuk menyiasat bagaimana para pelajar sebenarnya menggunakan kamus Bahasa Inggeris, persepsi mereka terhadap penggunaan kamus Bahasa Inggeris untuk memperluaskan perbendaharaan kata, mengenalpasti faktor faktor yang mendorong pelajar mempelajari perbendaharaan kata Bahasa Inggeris menggunakan kamus, dan masalah-masalah yang mereka hadapi semasa menggunakan kamus Bahasa Inggeris. Maklumat dari responden diperolehi menggunakan kaedah soal selidik sebagai instrument utama. Responden telah dipilih secara rambang (cluster random sampling) daripada 14 buah kelas Tingkatan Empat di sebuah Sekolah Menengah di Kuching. Penganalisaan data-data yang dikumpul membolehkan kita melihat bagaimana cara para pelajar sebenarnya menggunakan kamus Bahasa Inggeris, bagaimana persepsi mereka terhadap penggunaan kamus untuk memperluaskan perbendaharaan kata, factor-faktor yang mendorong mereka menggunakan kamus untuk mempelajari perbendaharaan kata baru dan masalah-masalah yang mereka hadapi semasa menggunakan kamus Bahasa Inggeris. Berdasarkan hasil kajian, ia menunjukkan bahawa para pelajar tidak bergantung sangat kepada kamus Bahasa Inggeris untuk mencari makna sesuatu perkataan baru tetapi hanya menggunakannya selepas cuba mendapatkan makna sesuatu perkataan daripada konteks. Fakta kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa sebilangan besar para pelajar berfikiran positif terhadap penggunaan kamus Bahasa Inggeris untuk mempelajari perbendaharaan kata mereka. Kajian ini juga menggambarkan bahawa factor yang menjadi pendorong utama mereka memilih untuk mempelajari perbendaharaan kata baru menggunakan kamus Bahasa Inggeris adalah ibubapa mereka sendiri. Berdasarkan kajian ini juga, masalah yang kebanyakan pelajar hadapi semasa menggunakan kamus Bahasa Inggeris ialah berkenaan dengan perkataan-perkataan yang digunakan untuk menerangkan makna sesuatu perkataan itu yang didapati lebih sukar daripada perkataan itu sendiri.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.0. Chapter overview

This chapter discusses the background, the statement of the problem, the scope, the purpose, the research objectives, the research questions, the significance, the definition of key terms, and the limitations of the proposed study on the use of dictionary as an approach in learning vocabulary.

1.1. Background of the study

Malaysia greatly needs competent and proficient personnel in English to teach the language as the country is moving towards industrialization and rapid economic progress. In view of that, the significance of communication skills in today's society requires each Malaysian to be communicatively competent in English. As a fast developing nation like Malaysia, knowledge of the language and linguistic competence alone are not adequate in view of the fact that the country is playing a crucial part in global trade. Moreover, the English Language "bestows prestige and guarantees a job and social as well as occupational mobility (Alias Mohd. Yatim, 1997).

For secondary schools' English Language syllabus, the teaching of the receptive and productive skills both aim at producing individuals who are competent and efficient users of the English Language. The English Language programme for secondary schools thereby clearly spell out that one of its objectives is to enable students to listen to and understand spoken English in school and in real-life situation outside the school (Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris, 1989).

For non-native speakers of English, learning the English vocabulary is not an easy task as it is for the native speakers and it needs time and the right approach. One very basic way of learning the vocabulary is by referring unfamiliar words to the dictionary. Summers, in Carter & Mc Carthy(1995) claimed that the use of dictionary could help foreign learners in the receptive and productive aspects of the language therefore learners are encouraged to take advantage of the rich information stored in the dictionary. However, without efficient skills, the dictionary alone cannot do much to help.

Due to its role as a book so reliable to refer to, many people may regard the dictionary as a mere reference book but Bishop (1998) refuted that the dictionary is not only a reference book but is also a record book of vocabulary of a language. His claim therefore, implies that the dictionary contains very useful information about words and their proper usage.

This is further supported by Summers, in Nunan (1991), who pointed out that dictionaries give learners better understanding of a word, not only as a means to find out meanings and checking spellings, but also for getting more useful information of the word of interest. As it plays such an important role in language learning, Jackson (2002) likens the dictionary to a judge who is able to settle a linguistic dispute and he believes that every household must have at least a copy of this valuable resource material. He added,

“School-going children are taught how to use the dictionary in school. There is one in every office. Lawyers quote the dictionary in court, teachers and lecturers refer to it, politicians and preachers argue their points from its definition and the society believes what the dictionary says.”

As essential as a hammer to a carpenter, so is the English dictionary to a language or rather a second language learner. Asher et.al (1999) acknowledged the fact that the dictionary is a useful device in helping learners to learn and extend their vocabulary, besides other purposes but learners are advised to use the dictionary with care so as not to be misled by it and to use it effectively, quite a high level of dictionary skills is required and this must be taught alongside other language competences by the teacher.

1.2. Statement of the problem

With respect to the significant role of the dictionary in helping second language learners in particular to learn the English vocabulary, the task of educating them the right dictionary skills and instilling positive perceptions towards the potentials that dictionaries have in helping them learn more vocabularies are challenges that English language teachers should not ignore. However one important issue needs to be addressed first, that is to determine learners' attitudes in using the dictionary to supplement their language learning. Therefore, in order to understand how learners actually use their dictionaries for vocabulary learning purposes and their diverse perceptions towards the use of dictionaries, the different factors that motivate them to use dictionaries and the various problems they come across while consulting dictionaries, it is therefore significant and necessary to conduct this study as a preliminary step to probe the problem.

1.3. Scope of the study

This study is restricted solely to the study on the use of the English print dictionary for learning vocabulary. It focuses only on four aspects of the topic namely the students' skillhabits in using the dictionary, students' perceptions towards the use of dictionary for learning vocabulary, problems students encounter while consulting the dictionary, and factors that influence their choice of using the dictionary as a vocabulary learning approach. Therefore, there will be no other things involved in the study besides those mentioned above.

1.4. Purpose of the study

The primary purpose of carrying out this study is to gather relevant information pertaining to the use of dictionary by upper secondary students who learn English as a second language in order to enable English language teachers understand better how they actually put this resource material to use for learning and improving their English vocabulary. It is expected that the study would be able to show some significant findings and be of use to both English language teachers and learners.

1.5. Research Objectives

This study aims to achieve the following objectives:

- (i) To find out learners' skills~~habits~~ in using the dictionary for learning and/or improving their English vocabulary.
- (ii) To investigate learners' perceptions towards the use of dictionary as an approach for learning English vocabulary.

(iii) To identify factors that motivate learners in using the dictionary for improving their
vocabulary for learning

~~their English vocabulary.~~

(iv) To discover the difficulties that learners face encounter in using the dictionary for
vocabulary learning purposes as a vocabulary

~~learning strategy.~~

1.6. Research Questions

The study is ~~actually~~ designed to elicit answers for the following research questions:

i. Is the dictionary learners' first choice for learning vocabulary?

~~1. How do students actually make use of the dictionary in learning and enriching their~~

~~ii. —English vocabulary? Do learners really make use of the dictionary?~~

~~iii. How do learners use the dictionary?~~

~~iv. When do learners usually refer to the dictionary?~~

~~ii.v. For what reason do learners consult the dictionary?~~

~~2. What are the students' perceptions towards/of the use of dictionary as a strategy for~~

~~vi. —learning the English vocabulary? Do learners like to use the dictionary for~~
~~learning vocabulary?~~

~~vii. Why do learners prefer using the dictionary for learning vocabulary?~~

~~ii.viii. What are learners' perceptions towards the use of dictionary for learning~~
~~vocabulary?~~

~~3. What factor(s) motivate students to improve their English vocabulary~~

~~ix. —with the use of the dictionary?~~ What make learners want to improve their vocabulary through the dictionary?

~~x. — Who encourage learners to make full use of the dictionary?~~

~~iv. —~~

~~Are there 4. do students encounter any difficulties- encountered by learners in using the dictionary? as a vocabulary learning~~

~~xi. —strategy?~~

~~xii. — What are the difficulties that learners encounter in using the dictionary?~~

~~v-xiii. — What are the factors that caused those difficulties?~~

1.7. Significance of the study

In view of the fact that the vocabulary is a very important element of a language, it is regarded worth studying how non-native speakers especially second language learners learn their English vocabulary, especially those who do so through the use of the dictionary, hence this study. It is hoped that the findings of the study would enable English language teachers to understand their learners' strength, weaknesses and needs better in respect of the use of dictionary for their vocabulary learning purposes so that they could help them to develop effective dictionary skills as they advance further in their studies. By understanding learners' dictionary ~~skills~~ habits in, their different perceptions towards the use of dictionaries for vocabulary learning, the factors that motivate them to learn vocabulary with the dictionary and the diverse difficulties they face while

consulting the dictionary, teachers would be able to provide them with the right form of guidance and assistance.

This study is also expected to provide some useful information for future researchers who wish to carry out further research in other aspects of this area of study. As far as the study is concerned, the researcher could not find any local literature collections on the study about the use of dictionary for learning vocabulary in Malaysia. So, the researcher hopes this study would add to the literature collection of its kind in Malaysia, if any.

1.8. Definition of key terms

For the benefit of readers, the following terminologies or vocabulary items have been defined as brief and precise as possible based on reliable sources. So with those simple definitions, the researcher is optimistic that readers would be able to understand their meanings as used in context more easily.

1.8.1. Dictionary

According to Graddoll, Cheshire, and Swam(2003), dictionary is “a book which can provide syntactic, phonetic, and historical information of a word.” As the definition suggests, it is such a rich source of information that deals with vocabulary in the English language and as far as this study is concerned, the dictionary refers to both the monolingual(English-English dictionary) and the bilingual(English-BM dictionary) but the print dictionary only.

1.8.2. Second Language

Gramley, S., (2001) defines ‘second language’ as a language learnt after and in addition to a native language by any given speaker. In the context of the study second language refers to the English language which has been given the status as a second language in Malaysia.

1.8.3. Approach

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English/LDOCE (2003) defines ‘approach’ as a method in doing or dealing with something. The term ‘approach’ as used in this study refers to the use of the dictionary as a means for acquiring and learning the English vocabulary. In this context, learners use the dictionary in order to gain mastery of the English vocabulary as their main objective.

1.8.4. Perceptions

Perception as used in this study refers to how one understands and thinks of something. Lindsay & Norman(1977) defined perceptions as “the process by which human organized sensory stimulations into meaningful experiences of the world.” In this study, the term ‘perceptions’ is used to refer to how the participants feel, how they think and what their belief is towards the use of dictionary as an approach for learning the English vocabulary.

1.8.5. HABITS

~~Statt(1998) defines habit as a “learned response to a given situation which occurs regularly and gradually becomes automatic in one’s behaviour.” In the context of the~~

~~study, the term 'habit' specifically refers to how the dictionary is actually put to use by a language learner as a device for learning vocabulary.~~

1.9. Limitations of the study

The study only focuses on respondents who are learning English as a second language only at a sub-urban secondary school in Kuching and they are currently sitting in Form Four classes. As the scope of the study is limited only to one particular school in Kuching and a small number of participants, the findings would not be able to represent other findings if done on a bigger population of the same or different categories of students in the division, in particular and Sarawak as a whole.

1.10. Conclusion

Chapter one has provided all the necessary information that the researcher could think of about the proposed study on the use of dictionary for learning vocabulary. The main objective of the chapter was actually to give readers a focus and better understanding of the proposed study. The following chapter shall discuss the review of literature pertaining to the study on the use of dictionary by renowned researchers.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED RESEARCH AND LITERATURE

2.0. INTRODUCTION

This chapter contains review of related research and literature on the use of English dictionary. For readers' information, all references used for this study were from books and journals published overseas because references on the study of dictionary use, in the form of thesis or research papers by local researchers, so far were not yet available to the researcher.

2.1. The dictionary as a language-learning companion

The dictionary has been a long-time-companion of many people who learn English either as a second or foreign language and almost everyone needs a dictionary at certain point of time in their lives. Kent, D.(2001) stated that the dictionary is an essential source for data concerning vocabulary items, and it is not simply a classroom tool but an object of life-long use. On the one hand, Fromkin & Rodman (1993)claimed that a dictionary is filled with words and their meanings. Similarly, (Gramley, 2001), called the dictionary a book which contains list of words of a language and gives all sorts of information. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English better known as LDOCE on the other hand describes the dictionary as a book that gives a list of words that are arranged neatly in alphabetical order and explains their meanings in the same language, as in the case of a monolingual dictionary or in another language, as in the case of a bilingual dictionary. No matter what the definitions are, the dictionary is likened to a teacher whom one refers to in time of linguistic needs or uncertainties.

2.2. Dictionary and vocabulary learning

No one can deny the fact that the vocabulary of a language is indispensable. Without vocabulary a language cannot function. The Compendium (1991).stated that every individual has two types of vocabulary in his or her mind, that is the passive or sometimes called receptive vocabulary and the active vocabulary which is sometimes known as the productive vocabulary. The passive vocabulary includes all the words that a person recognizes and understands when listening and reading where as productive or active vocabulary are used by a person for speaking and writing purposes

Burton, S.H., Humphries, J.A(1992) claimed that one's vocabulary is the range of words that one can use. The size of vocabulary that one has determines the performance in all aspects of English language work. The larger the vocabulary one possesses, the better the performance is because a large vocabulary helps in expressing ideas precisely and vividly, without repeating oneself.

2.3. Purpose for using the dictionary

Guth, Hans Paul(1990) said that some users turn to the dictionary just to check for a spelling e.g (develope or develop) or an unusual word(Phlegmatic, serendipidity) while others appeal to it in order to settle an argument that is to prove themselves right and someone wrong for that matter. They realized that many writers think of the dictionary not as a final authority but as a guide. Hence, they turn to it regularly for information, advice and inspiration. But one mistake that non-native speakers usually make is that they tend to overuse the dictionary for the sake of learning vocabulary. Neubach & Cohen 1998) as cited in Cohen(1990) stated that this practice not only distract a reader away

from a text currently read but it could also be misleading in some ways and a good tip of using the dictionary is to use it cautiously.

2.4. The ideal dictionary for learners

The type of dictionary is also an issue for users to consider. By comparison, bilingual dictionaries are found to be more misleading than the monolingual dictionaries. This is simply because languages often do not have direct or precise equivalents for each other. In that sense, a monolingual dictionary is more useful and helpful because it can provide more specific meaning to a word but then learners should be well-versed in the language in order to comprehend the definition given in the monolingual dictionary (Cohen, 1990). So, for second language learners, the learner dictionary is the ideal one for them to use. However, they must know that the learner dictionary lack advanced vocabulary compared to monolingual dictionaries and they often have the definitions simplified which do more confusion than comprehension to the user.

2.5. Using a dictionary as a pre-listening activity

The dictionary, no doubt is an important resource material to language learners both as a reference as well as a lifelong asset which could be used for generations. Second language learners of English need the dictionary apart from other vocabulary learning strategies to enhance the learning of the language, which is not their own. It is indeed an essential tool in their effort to learn and acquire another language besides their mother tongue and it plays such a very vital role in helping them to learn the language effectively especially the vocabulary of the language. The use of dictionaries, according