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Iranian EFL Learners' Perceptions about Monolingual Dictionaries and Their Vocabulary Proficiency

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Abstract

Using monolingual dictionaries for educational purposes has become one of the major focuses of language learning in general and vocabulary learning proficiency in particular. Monolingual dictionaries cover so many areas for language learning such as grammar, spelling, and phonetics. Nonetheless, one of the most successful areas in which monolingual dictionaries can assist language learning is teaching and learning of vocabulary. Many studies have been conducted on different aspects of monolingual dictionary use in the Iranian context, but there have been few attempts to focus on its efficacy in the university environment for instructional purposes. This study aims to build on the previous studies in this area and investigate the effect of monolingual dictionary use on vocabulary learning proficiency. To do so, 113 undergraduate English Language and Literature students of Yazd University participated in this study. The subjects completed a fourteen-item questionnaire and a multiple-choice vocabulary test containing twenty questions. The researcher used Pearson product-moment correlation to analyse the strength of relationship between monolingual dictionary use and vocabulary learning proficiency. The results indicated that there was a strong positive correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.607$, $r^2 = 0.36$); furthermore, the large effect size of common variance shows that the more the use of monolingual dictionaries is reported, the more the proficiency of vocabulary learning is observed. The findings of the current research can have significant implications for improving the learners' performance in learning vocabulary.

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Keywords: Monolingual dictionaries; Vocabulary learning proficiency; Learning English as a foreign language; Perception.

1. Introduction

Language as a means of communication is an integral part of human life, and without it living means nothing. Chastain (1988) puts forward that, one of the most important element for having a good conversation is acceptable

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knowledge of vocabulary. According to Celce-Murcia (2001, p. 285), "vocabulary learning is central to language acquisition, whether the language is first, second, or foreign". Of course, in conversations other elements such as syntax, culture, and social setting play a crucial role but vocabulary proficiency is of prime importance. For foreign language learners, memorization and retention of vocabulary is not so simple; so many scholars have researched to find a good way for vocabulary memorization, but still the problem is not solved completely. Researches render so many methods and approaches some of which are accepted and some are ignored.

Throughout years, the use of dictionary for language learning has been highlighted, and it has been recognized as an important language-learning tool (Bensoussan, Sim, & Weiss, 1984; Laufer, 1990; Luppescu & Day, 1993). Dictionary as a source of vocabulary learning can be really helpful for English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Thus, the present study is an attempt to investigate the effect of monolingual dictionaries on vocabulary learning proficiency. The study was conducted among non-native English speaking learners in Yazd University.

2. Review of literature

According to Schmitt (2002), four strategies can help learners to find and retain the meaning of unknown words. He categorized them as guessing from context clues, deliberately studying words on word cards, using word parts and dictionary use.

Throughout history, scientists conducted so many studies to find out the differences between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in language learning. Tomaszczyk (1979) was the first researcher who paid attention to dictionary use by non-native English speakers and conducted some researches based on that. He carried out a study to investigate whether the EFL learners' preference was toward bilingual or monolingual dictionary use; the result indicated that the participants preferred to use bilingual dictionaries (as cited in Ryu, 2005). However, some other researchers like Bejoint (1981) believed that EFL learners preferred to use monolingual dictionaries more than bilingual ones according to his research conducted on French EFL learners.

Some researchers believe that monolingual dictionaries can be a good facilitator for vocabulary learning. Baxter (1980) states that more emphasis should be given to the use of monolingual dictionary because it gives the meaning of vocabularies into a context (as cited in Luppescu & Day, 1993). Underhill (1985) mentions that the attention of monolingual dictionaries on high frequency words is much more than bilingual dictionaries (as cited in Hayati & Fattahzadeh, 2006).

Some scholars like Thomson (1987) believe that all the details which are in a monolingual dictionary for a single word can be equally given in a bilingual dictionary as well. Moreover, he thinks that bilingual dictionary is more worthwhile than monolingual one. Luppescu and Day (1993) investigated the influence of bilingual dictionary use on vocabulary proficiency with the participation of 293 Japanese EFL learners. The result indicated that vocabulary scores of those who used a dictionary were higher than the rest of participants.

Despite all these arguments, some scholars believe that dictionary use is not a good way for learning vocabulary. Hayati and Fattahzadeh (2006) carried out a research on the effect of monolingual and bilingual dictionary on vocabulary recall and retention at Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz. The result of their study indicated that there was no significant relationship between dictionary types and learners' vocabulary recall and retention.

The current study was conducted among EFL learners. It not only focused on the effects of monolingual dictionaries on vocabulary proficiency, but it also aimed at an empirical exploration concerning the differences between male and female proficiency of vocabulary learning and their monolingual dictionary use.

Thus the study seeks to find answers to the following questions:
1) Is there any significant relationship between using monolingual dictionary and vocabulary proficiency?
2) Is there any significant difference between male and female proficiency of vocabulary learning and their monolingual dictionary use?

3. Method

The section is divided into four parts: participants, instruments, procedures, and data analysis.

3.1. Participants

The participants were 113 Iranian undergraduate students, majoring in English Language and Literature at Yazd University. They were randomly selected from both genders, and their age ranged from 19 to 23. Based on the scores in the Oxford Quick Placement Test, the learners at the intermediate level proficiency were chosen.

3.2. Instruments

Three instruments were used in the study to collect data. They were an Oxford Quick Placement Test, a questionnaire, and a vocabulary multiple choice test.

3.2.1. Oxford Quick Placement Test

A standard general English proficiency test of Oxford was utilized in this study. The test was a paper-based one consisting of structure and written expressions, cloze reading selections and vocabulary items.

3.2.2. Questionnaire

A questionnaire with the aim of eliciting some information about dictionary use was conducted. It was divided into two parts, the first section was a demographic part and the next one included fourteen 5-point Likert scale statements. The participants were required to read the questionnaire items and indicate the frequency of using each through selecting one of the following adverbs of frequency:

- a) Never (1)
- b) Seldom (2)
- c) Sometimes (3)
- d) Often (4)
- e) Always (5)

Prior to administrating the questionnaire, some professors in TEFL reviewed it and gave some comments based on which some items were improved. The given time for the questionnaire was 30 minutes.

3.2.3. Vocabulary test

The test consisted of twenty 3-choice items. Each question contained one sentence with a word surrounded by apostrophes and the students were asked to choose the word closest in meaning to target word. The test was piloted using a sample of 20 BA participants majoring in English. The reliability estimate of the test using Cronbach alpha formula was $\alpha$: .856, which was very high. The allotted time to answer the test was 20 minutes.

3.3. Procedures

First, the proficiency level of the students was measured according to the Oxford Quick Placement Test, after which 113 intermediate students were randomly selected out of the 180 subjects who took part in the test. At the third step, the questionnaires were distributed to the participants, and finally the vocabulary tests were given to them. Prior to taking the test and completing the questionnaire, some brief information about how to complete the questionnaire and how to answer the vocabulary test was offered.
3.4. **Data analysis**

To probe the research questions, descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation were calculated using the 16th version of SPSS software.

**4. Results and discussion**

To probe the first research question concerning the significant interaction between the use of monolingual dictionary and vocabulary learning proficiency, the descriptive statistics was calculated, the results of which are indicated in Table 1.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the use of monolingual dictionary and vocabulary learning proficiency</th>
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As indicated in Table 1, the relationship between the use of monolingual dictionary and vocabulary learning proficiency was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation. The preliminary analyses indicated that there was no violation of the normality, linearity and homoscedasticity assumptions. There was a strong positive correlation between the two variables ($r = 0.607$, $N = 113$, $p = 0.001$). The shared variance between the two variables was 0.36 showing a good coefficient of determination. Therefore, the obtained results indicated that the more the use of monolingual dictionary, the more the proficiency of vocabulary learning.

To investigate differences between male and female learners’ vocabulary learning and their monolingual dictionary use, the data were split according to the gender variable at the first step and then a correlational analysis was carried out for each of the gender separately. The result of female correlational analysis is shown in Table 2.

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<th>Table 2. Descriptive statistics for the use of female proficiency of vocabulary learning and monolingual dictionary use</th>
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As indicated in Table 2, there was a strong positive correlation between female vocabulary proficiency and monolingual dictionary use ($r = 0.653$, $N = 55$, $p = 0.002$) with an effect size of 0.42 indicating that the more the use
of monolingual dictionary, the more the proficiency of female vocabulary learning. Moreover, the result of male correlational analysis is given in Table 3.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Vocabulary Proficiency</th>
<th>Pearson Correlation</th>
<th>Sig. (2-tailed)</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tr>
<td>Vocabulary Proficiency</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>.011</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dictionary Use</td>
<td>.545</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sig. (2-tailed)</td>
<td>.0</td>
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<td>Number</td>
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As indicated in Table 3, there was a strong positive correlation between male vocabulary proficiency and monolingual dictionary use \( (r = 0.545, N = 58, p = 0.011) \) with an effect size of 0.29 indicating that the more the use of monolingual dictionary, the more the proficiency of male vocabulary learning.

To test the statistical significance of the difference between the two correlation coefficients, the researchers typically use the observed value of \( z \) (\( z_{obs} \) value). If the \( z_{obs} \) value is between -1.96 and 1.96, we cannot claim that there is a statistically significant difference between the two correlation coefficients. Therefore, the calculation of \( z_{obs} \) value \( (z = -0.49) \) in this research indicated that there was no significant difference between males and females in the extent to which their vocabulary learning proficiency can be affected by the use of monolingual dictionaries. In fact, none of the gender groups are significantly different from each other, although the correlation value is higher for the female subjects.

In general, the findings indicate that the use of monolingual dictionary can help EFL learners to become more proficient in learning vocabulary, although no significant differences were found between male and female learners.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this article was to find an answer to the question of whether the use of monolingual dictionaries in language learning can help the students to memorize and retain vocabulary better. The study reported here indicated that monolingual dictionary can be a helpful device for a better proficiency in vocabulary for EFL learners. Therefore, it can be concluded that the application of monolingual dictionary in teaching classroom can be a useful device for students. Nonetheless, there are some limitations in this study. First, the participants in this research were chosen among only intermediate EFL learners. Second, the focus of this study was just on vocabulary proficiency not on any other skills. Hence, conducting research on other fields could provide broader insights. This study has implications for teaching and learning. To broaden the depth and breadth of vocabulary learning, the learners can be encouraged to make use of monolingual dictionaries especially at higher levels of language proficiency. Additionally, constraining the learners to the mere definition of the words provided by the textbooks may not give them an in-depth knowledge of the L2 lexical items. Last but not the least, it is suggested that the same research be conducted in other fields of study.

References


