

The Electronic Dictionary in the Language Classroom: The Views of Language Learners and Teachers

James Ronald
Shinya Ozawa
Hiroshima Shudo University

The pocket electronic dictionary (PED) has the potential to be a powerful language learning tool. At the same time, it may be seen as an obstacle to communication, a waste of classroom time, and a source of conflict between foreign-language learners and the teachers. This presentation will report an in-depth survey of three sets of people influenced by the widespread presence and use of the PED in the classroom: foreign-language students, teachers who share the native language of the students, and teachers who are native speakers of the target language. The survey, which takes into account the beliefs, attitudes, and expectations of Japanese learners of English and of their teachers regarding the PED, revealed important differences in their opinions about how and when the dictionary should be used, in the effect of dictionary use on foreign language vocabulary development, and regarding users' needs for training or guidance in the use of electronic dictionaries. The presentation will also recommend means by which understanding of these differing perspectives may help both language learners and teachers make the most of the potential of the electronic dictionary.

In formal educational environments, from high school onwards, use of the handheld electronic dictionary is becoming increasingly widespread. In some classrooms, the electronic dictionary is the only dictionary to be seen. It is typically brought to class by a larger proportion of language students than was its paper forebear, and appears to be used more frequently and more indiscriminately than were paper dictionaries. The nature of the electronic dictionary, together with its increased presence in the language class, has wrought various changes both to learner dictionary use and to the role of the teacher in the language classroom, and these merit further investigation.

This paper begins with a consideration of some of the ways in which the nature of electronic dictionaries may affect dictionary use. Following this, we report a survey of 124 Japanese university students' knowledge and use of electronic dictionary functions, use of electronic dictionaries in language learning activities, experience and perceived needs of electronic dictionary guidance or training; and electronic dictionary user etiquette. Drawing on the findings of the survey, we will offer suggestions as to language teachers' roles in facilitating more effective electronic dictionary use.

Handheld electronic dictionary use differs from that for paper dictionaries in a variety of ways. As Nakayama and Osaki (2008) note, the process of consulting an electronic dictionary differs significantly from that for paper dictionary consultation (Schofield 1982). With many electronic dictionaries, with monolingual, bilingual, collocational and other dictionaries contained within one device, users do not need to decide which dictionary to take to a particular class or use for a given task. Neither is there usually a need to determine and look up the canonical form of an encountered L2 word form; entering any form of a word will usually lead the user to the entry for the required word. Reliance on the alphabetical order of words is also much reduced since the user generally only needs to enter the word on the keyboard of the electronic dictionary. The locating of multiword expressions (Béjoint 1981, Atkins and Varantola 1998) is also made much easier with electronic dictionaries that offer an idiom location function.

The above-mentioned features of electronic dictionaries may all affect dictionary user behaviour, as will familiarity with and use of these features, the extent of reflection prior to consultation, and speed and success of dictionary consultation. Primary and secondary purposes

for dictionary consultation, will also affect dictionary use; for different users at different times, the main reason for using a dictionary may be to understand some lexical information and apply that information in some way, it may be to learn specific looked-up information, or it may be simply to satisfy curiosity. Extent of electronic dictionary ownership and norms of dictionary use within a class or group of learners may affect their use, as may the nature of the class activity. The teacher may also have an important influence on electronic dictionary use in class: through rules regarding their use, guidance or training, encouragement or prohibition.

An important role of language teachers is to help their students gain the greatest benefit from the language learning resources that they have at their disposal. While this role should apply to the electronic dictionary, there are various obstacles to its fulfillment. Perhaps foremost among these obstacles is that of ignorance among teachers: ignorance regarding the electronic dictionary that is in their students' hands; ignorance of students' needs regarding guidance or training in electronic dictionary use; and ignorance about the best means to provide whatever help their students may need. The main goal of this paper is to consider means by which language teachers may be enabled to enable their students to make the most of their electronic dictionary.

The study

Some answers to questions about dictionary use can only be obtained by close monitoring of dictionary users: with monitors recording details of users' dictionary use (Atkins & Varantola 1998), by making video recordings (Nakayama & Osaki 2008), or with automatic logging of electronic dictionary use (Laufer & Hill 2000). Other questions, relating to user perceptions or evaluations of dictionary use, may be best answered by asking dictionary users, whether in interviews or through questionnaires. As the focus of this study was on perceptions relating to electronic dictionaries and their use, and was conducted with relatively large numbers of language learners and their teachers, questionnaires were chosen as the most suitable means for investigating these issues. The questionnaire, developed from one for teachers used in a previous study (Ozawa & Ronald 2005), were designed with reference to advice from Dörnyei (2003) and Lew (2002). One set of questionnaires, written in Japanese, was prepared for all the first year English Department students at a middle-ranking Japanese university; another set of questionnaires, in Japanese or English, was made for all these students' teachers of English at the university. Our main focus here will be on the students' questionnaires.

The students' questionnaire was administered at the beginning of a lecture which was intended for all 143 first year English Department students. As a total of 19 students were either late or absent from the lecture, 124 completed the questionnaire, taking about 15 minutes to do so. Of the 124 students, 81% were female and 19% male, typical figures for students majoring in English in Japan. 96% of the respondents own an electronic dictionary, the vast majority of which contain many full-content dictionaries and have a range of functions. All but two of these students usually bring their electronic dictionary to class. Almost three quarters of the respondents obtained their first electronic dictionary in senior high school, between the age of 15 and 18.

We asked respondents about their knowledge and use of some of the functions contained within their electronic dictionaries. Responses are summarized in Figure 1.

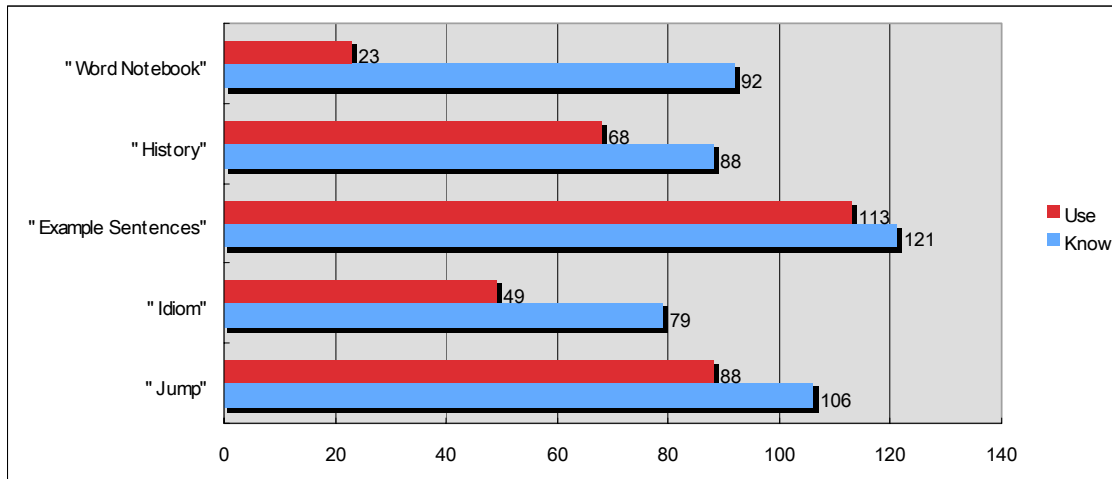


Figure 1. Electronic dictionary user knowledge and use of functions

The *Jump* function allows users to move, for example, from the entry in an English-Japanese to the definition of an unknown word in that entry in a Japanese dictionary. The *Idiom* function helps users locate multiword expressions such as idioms or phrasal verbs. Example sentences for an entry are not automatically shown, to allow space to show more of the senses of looked-up words on the screen, but are shown when requested. The *History* button allows users to see records of words they have looked up, while users of the *Word Notebook* function can make word lists or type other information to be stored in the device.

All five functions were known by over 60% of the respondents, but their use ranged between over 90% and under 20%. The best known functions were the *Example Sentences* and *Jump* functions; these were also the most widely used. The least well known were the *Idiom* and *History* functions, while the least used were the *Word Notebook* and *Idiom* functions.

We also asked participants about their use of their electronic dictionaries in their English language class activities. Responses are summarized in Table 1. There was wide variation among participants, but there are clearly some types of classroom activities for which electronic dictionaries are perceived to be more used than others. Around half the participants reported often using their electronic dictionaries for grammar, writing, reading and translation activities. In contrast, only 7% of participants reported using them for listening activities and 14% for speaking. Perhaps surprisingly, for no activities did any participants record that electronic dictionary use was forbidden.

	Often	Sometimes	Not often	Don't use	No	N/A
Grammar	67	42	6	4	4	1
Writing	69	40	7	6	3	1
Reading	57	45	4	3	12	2
Listening	9	42	41	19	11	2
Speaking	17	48	31	17	10	1
Translation	55	16	4	3	35	11

Table 1. Electronic dictionary use for English class activities

We asked the participants about their experience of advice or guidance in using dictionaries. Only 28% said they had received advice in dictionary use, 6% some kind of guidance, and 19% training of some kind. Most training was for paper dictionaries, while support for electronic dictionary use focused mainly on functions. In response to whether they would like to receive guidance or training in electronic dictionary use, 70% of the respondents said no. Only 27% said yes, with most of these proposing that guidance on electronic dictionary functions would be most useful.

Finally, regarding etiquette in electronic dictionary use, turning off the sound was mentioned by 48% of respondents, no response was given by 29%, and other responses were about not using electronic dictionaries in tests, or strategies such as not using too much, looking through complete entries, and using the dictionary's functions.

Discussion

Perhaps the most important finding from questions regarding electronic use in class activities is not about which activity requires most dictionary use, but that electronic dictionaries are widely used for the majority of language class activities. When we add the findings that very few of the respondents have received advice, guidance, or training in their use, that many electronic dictionary functions are not widely used, and that for most students electronic dictionary etiquette use can be summed up as turning the sound off, it does appear that these language learners do need some kind of support to make the most of their electronic dictionaries.

The low level of interest expressed in receiving guidance in electronic dictionary use suggests two things. One is that there is no perceived need for help: a feeling among electronic dictionary users that they already know what they need to know. Another implication may be that a generation of students who are very familiar with various handheld electronic devices does not want guidance in using one of these from older teachers who are not. Given these circumstances, language teachers need to reflect on how best to give students support in using electronic dictionaries effectively. One approach may be to orientate learners, and teachers, to four possible areas of guidance or training: the contents and functions of electronic dictionaries; the type of information found within dictionary entries; electronic dictionary use etiquette (when and where to use—or not); and the use of the electronic dictionary as a vocabulary learning tool.

Regarding the functions and contents of electronic dictionaries, this could be approached by making it the topic of class presentations or discussions, with students learning from each other. The teacher's use of the electronic dictionary in class will also change students' attitudes; from being a questionable expert on the language being studied (after all, isn't the dictionary more expert?), the teacher may become a role model as an expert language learner who makes the most of this language learning tool.

Given the extensive unreflective use of electronic dictionaries, with the majority of this being to look up or check the meaning of L2 words, questions challenging this behaviour may help language learners reflect on one long-term purpose of their electronic dictionary use: vocabulary learning. Questions may include: *What choices do you have when you see a word that you do not know? What happens to the words you look up? How do you choose which looked-up words to learn? How do you learn these words?* Teachers may also stretch students' electronic dictionary use abilities through setting language awareness tasks (finding senses, collocations, registers, varieties, etc.).

In conclusion, findings from this study suggest that many language students may fail to exploit the potential of electronic dictionaries to be powerful and effective language learning tools. Language teachers, too, may fail to provide the support in this area that language learners appear to need. We have suggested some ways of addressing this situation, so that language learners may become more effective electronic dictionary users, and teachers useful and respected facilitators towards the fulfillment of this goal.

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