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DICTIONARIES AND CONTEMPORARY UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

Introduction

Dictionaries have always been one of the most basic reference tools used by virtually every student of any English Department. Traditionally the word “dictionary” is associated with a hefty book containing lists of words in alphabetical order together with their definitions or translations from one language into another. This traditional image is well illustrated by the first entry under the word *dictionary* in *Oxford English Dictionary* which states that a dictionary is “a book which explains or translates, usually in alphabetical order, the words of a language or languages (or of a particular category of vocabulary), giving for each word its typical spelling, an explanation of its meaning or meanings, and often other information, such as pronunciation, etymology, synonyms, equivalents in other languages, and illustrative examples” (2011).¹ Furthermore, OED explicates that “the earliest books to be referred to as dictionaries in English were those in which the meanings of the words of one language or dialect were given in another (or, in a polyglot dictionary, in two or more languages). Dictionaries (thus named) of this type began to appear in England during the 16th century, initially of Latin, later of modern languages.”²

Dictionaries have come a long way ever since the 16th century. Living in this day and age one should remember that dictionaries are not exclusively lexicons in a book format, but can take all shapes and sizes – from a traditional hefty book to a CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, flash drive, mobile phone application or a web page. This situation gives modern students an abundance of choices when preparing for their classes at home. Thinking about this phenomenon I wanted to find out what dictionaries my university students used when studying at home on a regular basis (whether they still used dictionaries in a traditional book format or perhaps only electronic or online formats). I was curious to know how traditional or how modern my students were when choosing their dictionaries. I also wanted to know if there were any significant differences in the use of various dictionary formats among male and female students. In order to find out a group of first year BA students

¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*. <http://www.oed.com./view/Entry/52325> [Accessed: 25.03.2011]

² *Ibidem*.

of the English Department of the Pedagogical University of Cracow had been asked to answer a questionnaire focusing on their regular use of various formats of dictionaries. My paper serves as an overview of the results of this mini-survey.

Surveyed group

When trying to find subjects for my study I approached in January 2011 all registered and attending full-time BA students of the 1st year (63 Polish students using English as a Foreign Language) of the English Department of the Pedagogical University of Cracow asking them to take a questionnaire prepared by me. The students knew from the very start that this questionnaire was optional and anonymous (the only personal data asked for included the age and gender of a given student) and the results of it would be used purely for academic purposes. Overall, in January 2011 my questionnaire was distributed in a printed format among all 63 students (19 male students and 44 female students). The students were to take it home and, if willing, to return the questionnaire to me within the next few days. Eventually, a group of 36 students (10 male students and 26 female students) answered and returned my questionnaire. Therefore, I would refer to them as the surveyed group in my paper. This group represented 57% of all registered and attending full-time students. Within the gender groups 10 male students represented 53% of their gender group in the 1st year, while 26 female students represented 59% of their gender group. The average age of the entire surveyed group as well as both gender groups was 20.

As the background information it should be added that the 1st year students taking part in my survey being Polish and using Polish as the first language had mastered English on at least B2 level according to the scale of the CEFR – Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (Council of Europe 2001: online) and between the time of my survey (January 2011) and the beginning of their English studies at the Pedagogical University (November 2010) had been taking a series of practical English classes at B2/C1 level according to the CEFR. The process of preparation for such classes requires a regular use of a dictionary at home, in a dorm (generally outside the university classroom).

Survey – questionnaire

Starting my mini-research with the assumption that the surveyed students did use dictionaries when preparing for their university classes I wanted to establish which dictionary format is the most popular among them. Having asked the students about their gender and age my questionnaire offered them 6 questions that could be answered either “YES” or “NO.” “NO” answer was a close-ended answer, while the answer “YES” required from a given student further information. For the students’ convenience and to avoid any misunderstanding of technical terms the questions were prepared in their first language – i.e. Polish. However, for the purpose of this paper all questions and answers are presented in English.

Questions and answers

Question 1 and overview of the answers

The students were asked the following question as the first one:

When preparing for your practical English classes at home, in a dorm (generally outside university) do you regularly use (that is – at least once a week) a dictionary or dictionaries run or installed on your computer from electronic media such as a CD-ROM/DVD or a USB flash drive?

– NO

– YES (please specify the format and the title of the dictionary)

Looking at all the answers one can see that dictionaries run or installed from a CD-ROM or a DVD were used by 16 out of 36 students (44%), while none of them used a USB flash drive dictionary.

When comparing male and female students one might notice that CD-ROM/DVD dictionaries are favoured by men as far as percentage points are concerned. 70% of men (7 out of 10 male students) used CD-ROM or DVD dictionaries compared with 35% of women using the same format (9 out of 26 female students). In most cases students used only one CD-ROM dictionary regularly. However, the exceptions are 2 students – 1 female student that used 3 CD-ROM/DVD-ROM dictionaries and 1 male student that used 2 different dictionaries in this format.

Table 1. The use of particular CD-ROM/DVD dictionaries by the surveyed students

| CD-ROM/DVD dictionary | Men (regular use) | Women (regular use) | Regular use by both men and women |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary | 4 out of 10 (40%) | 4 out of 26 (15%) | 8 out of 36 (22%) |
| Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 3 out of 26 (12%) | 4 out of 36 (11%) |
| Longman Pronunciation Dictionary/Longman Pronunciation Coach | 2 out of 10 (20%) | 2 out of 26 (8%) | 4 out of 36 (11%) |
| Cambridge Pronunciation Dictionary | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 0 | 1 out of 36 (4%) |
| Longman Słownik Współczesny | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Longman Exams Dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |

When it comes to the choice of titles all students seemed to favour mainstream ELT publishing houses such as Oxford University Press, Pearson Longman and Cambridge University Press. The usage of particular CD-ROM/DVD dictionaries among the surveyed group can be illustrated by the table below:

What is characteristic of these dictionaries chosen by the surveyed students is that they were all prepared for CEFR B2/C1 students of English as a Foreign Language and their CD-ROM/DVD versions are multimedia editions of their paper-printed versions existing in most cases for many years or even decades.

Question 2 and overview of the answers

The following question was used as the second one:

When preparing for your practical English classes at home, in a dorm (generally outside university) do you regularly use (that is – at least once a week) an online dictionary or online dictionaries?

- NO
- YES (please give the website address of a given online dictionary or dictionaries)

The internet can be referred to as the greatest library in the world. Students of English can access hundreds of English dictionaries online. Obviously, not every online dictionary offers real linguistic quality. However, as underlined by Li Lan already in 2005 “nearly all major traditional dictionaries” had their “online versions, whether partial or full, paid or free” (Lan 2005: 16). Therefore, one might say that contemporary students are spoiled for choice every time they go online to use a dictionary and consequently the abundance of sources may result in random or erratic use of various dictionaries.

Nevertheless, in my mini-research I focused only on the regular use of online dictionaries. Such a regular use of an online dictionary or dictionaries was confirmed by 89% of the surveyed group (32 out of 36 students). Online dictionaries were popular both with men and women. However, female students seemed to favour online dictionaries more than men. 96% (25 out of 26) of the female students used an online dictionary or dictionaries on a regular basis, while 70% (7 out of 10) of the male students used the same format routinely.

When it comes to particular online dictionaries the surveyed group produced the following results illustrated by the table below.

Table 2. The regular use of particular online dictionaries by the surveyed group

| Websites with online dictionaries | Regular use by male students | Regular use by female students | Regular use by both men and women |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| dictionary.cambridge.org (website run by Cambridge University Press offering a series of English dictionaries) | 5 out of 10 (50%) | 8 out of 26 (31%) | 13 out of 36 (36%) |
| ling.pl (website offering a number of English-Polish and Polish-English dictionaries existing in paper-printed versions as well as other bilingual dictionaries and entries from selected monolingual English dictionaries) | 3 out of 10 (30%) | 9 out of 26 (35%) | 12 out of 36 (33%) |
| oxforddictionaries.com (website run by Oxford University Press offering modern English dictionary and language reference service) | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 7 out of 26 (27%) | 8 out of 36 (22%) |
| ldoconline.com (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English) | 0 | 5 out of 26 (19%) | 5 out of 36 (14%) |
| megaslownik.pl (website run by the GG Network S.A. company offering an English-Polish and Polish-English dictionary as well as other bilingual dictionaries) | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 3 out of 26 (12%) | 4 out of 36 (11%) |
| slowniki.onet.pl (website being a part of ONET.PL online service offering a number of English-Polish and Polish-English dictionaries, phrase books as well as other bilingual dictionaries and phrase books, and entries from selected monolingual English dictionaries) | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 2 out of 36 (6%) |

| | | | |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| dict.pl (Polish-English and English-Polish dictionary) | 0 | 2 out of 26 (8%) | 2 out of 36 (6%) |
| urbandictionary.com (colloquial English and slang dictionary) | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 2 out of 36 (6%) |
| www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| thesaurus.com (English Thesaurus, part of dictionary.com online reference service) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| wordreference.com (website offering a number of bilingual dictionaries) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| pl.bab.la (website offering a Polish-English and English-Polish dictionary and other bilingual dictionaries as well as translation services) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| getionary.pl (Polish-English and English-Polish dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| translatoor.pl (Polish-English and English-Polish dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| howjsay.com (English Pronunciation Dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| translate.google.pl (multi-language translation service that can be used as a dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| merriam-webster.com (dictionary and language reference website run by Merriam Webster) | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 0 | 1 out of 36 (3%) |

Out of the ocean of online dictionaries and online reference tools the students from the surveyed group listed 17 websites. It might be worth noticing that 5 of all the mentioned websites came from main international ELT publishers such as Cambridge University Press, Oxford University Press, Pearson Longman and Merriam Webster, and out of the remaining 12 as many as 11 websites offered what might be essentially described as standard language content, while only 1 online dictionary (urbandictionary.com) focused primarily on slang and colloquial language.

Question 3 and overview of the answers

The surveyed students were asked the following question as the third one:

When preparing for your practical English classes at home, in a dorm (generally outside university) do you regularly use (that is – at least once a week) a dictionary or dictionaries in a traditional book format?

- NO
- YES (please give the title/titles)

Looking at the gathered answers one can see that 61% (22 out of 36) of all surveyed students did use a dictionary or dictionaries in a book format. However, at a closer look one notices that 21 out those 22 students were female, while only 1 male student used a dictionary in such a format. That means that 58% of the surveyed women used a paper-printed dictionary or dictionaries, while only 10% of the male group (represented by only 1 man) did the same.

When it comes to particular dictionary titles the students showed the tendency to choose household names in the ELT publishing market. The table below summarizes the students' choices:

Table 3. The regular use of dictionaries in a book format by the surveyed group

| Dictionary title | Regular use by male students | Regular use by female students | Regular use by both men and women |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English | 0 | 5 out of 26 (19%) | 5 out of 36 (14%) |
| Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary | 0 | 3 out of 26 (12%) | 3 out of 36 (8%) |
| Oxford Wordpower | 0 | 3 out of 26 (12%) | 3 out of 36 (8%) |
| Longman Pronunciation Dictionary | 0 | 3 out of 26 (12%) | 3 out of 36 (8%) |
| Longman Słownik Współczesny (English-Polish and Polish-English Dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 0 | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Wielki Słownik Oxford PWN (Polish-English and English-Polish dictionary) | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Langenscheidt Pocket English-Polish and Polish-English Dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Collins Cobuild English Dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Oxford Idioms Dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Oxford Collocations Dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Oxford Phrasal Verbs Dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |

Question 4 and overview of the answers

When preparing for your practical English classes at home, in a dorm (generally outside university) do you regularly use (that is – at least once a week) a dictionary or dictionaries in the form of a mobile phone application?

- NO
- YES (which one/which ones)

The general assumption is that virtually every university student does have a mobile phone and uses it for a variety of purposes including the usage as a reference tool. Following this assumption one might be surprised that out of 36 surveyed students only 5 (14% of the entire group) used a dictionary in the form of a mobile phone application. When it comes to genders 4 out of 26 (15%) female students used a dictionary in such a format, while only 1 out of 10 (10%) male students did the same. The following table summarizes their answers.

Table 4. The regular use of a dictionary in the form of a mobile phone application by the surveyed group

| Type of mobile phone application | Regular use by men | Regular use by women | Regular use by both men and women |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Xlator | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Wordmax | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 0 | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| Students did not specify the name of the application, but confirmed using one. | 0 | 2 out of 26 (8%) | 2 out of 36 (6%) |

Question 5 and overview of the answers

Students were asked the following question as the fifth one:

When preparing for your practical English classes at home, in a dorm (generally outside university) do you regularly use (that is – at least once a week) a dictionary or dictionaries in the format that was not mentioned in the previous questions?

- NO
- YES (which format/s; which dictionaries)

The presented above question was answered “no” by 35 out of 36 (97%) surveyed students. Only 1 female student (representing 3% of the entire surveyed group and 4% of her gender group) answered “yes.” This student used on a regular basis an electronic pocket dictionary with the content of *Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*. Therefore, a different electronic medium carried a content used by other students on a CD-ROM, online or in a book format.

Question 6 and overview of the answers

When finishing the completion of the questionnaire the surveyed students were asked the following question:

If at least once you answered “YES” to any of the previous questions could you please specify which dictionary format or formats you consider to be the best one/ones when preparing regularly for your practical English classes?

Although all students answered “yes” to at least one of the previous questions, 3 of them (2 women and 1 man) did not answer the 6th question. However, 33 students (92%) did answer this question. Many students pointed out two dictionary formats as equally beneficial for their regular class preparation. The following table summarizes their answers:

Table 5. Preferred format of a dictionary for a regular use by the surveyed group

| Preferred format of a dictionary for regular use | Men | Women | Both men and women |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| CD-ROM/DVD dictionary | 6 out of 10 (60%) | 6 out of 26 (23%) | 12 out of 36 (33%) |
| online dictionary | 2 out of 10 (20%) | 6 out of 26 (23%) | 8 out of 36 (22%) |
| book format | 0 | 5 out of 26 (19%) | 5 out of 36 (14%) |
| both CD-ROM/DVD and online dictionaries | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 3 out of 26 (12%) | 4 out of 36 (11%) |
| both online dictionary and a book format | 0 | 2 out of 26 (8%) | 2 out of 36 (6%) |
| both CD-ROM/DVD and mobile phone application | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| electronic pocket dictionary | 0 | 1 out of 26 (4%) | 1 out of 36 (3%) |
| no answer | 1 out of 10 (10%) | 2 out of 26 (4%) | 3 out of 36 (8%) |

Conclusions

Results of the last question concerning the preference survey together with the data focusing on the actual usage of particular dictionary formats collected in questions 1–5 show an overall picture of the students' use and directly stated preference of particular dictionary formats. Male students preferred to use CD-ROM/DVD applications and online dictionaries (however, it should be clearly pointed out that although the use of CD-ROM/DVD dictionaries and online dictionaries was on the same level among the male students, the CD-ROM/DVD dictionary format was definitely their favourite in terms of directly stated preference), while book format dictionaries seemed to be virtually obsolete to them. Women used online dictionaries in the biggest number, though in terms of directly stated preference online, CD-ROM/DVD and traditional book format dictionaries seemed to be similarly or even almost equally valued by them. Mobile phone dictionary applications as well as electronic pocket dictionaries did not seem to offer a preferred alternative for regular dictionary use for most of the surveyed students.

What is common for most of the students' choices in their regular dictionary use is that irrespective of the dictionary format they had a tendency to go for what could be referred to as reliable linguistic sources – that is dictionaries prepared by specialized ELT publishing houses.

Obviously, my mini-research was conducted on a very small population of university students and therefore further studies of a bigger university population in other similar academic institutions might shed more light on the issue of the use of various formats of dictionaries by contemporary university students of English.

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Słowniki a współcześni studenci języka angielskiego

Streszczenie

Słowniki były od zawsze jednym z podstawowych narzędzi używanych przez praktycznie wszystkich studentów na wydziałach filologii angielskiej. Tradycyjnie 'słownik' kojarzy się z opasłą książką zawierającą listę słów ułożonych alfabetycznie wraz z ich objaśnieniami lub tłumaczeniami z jednego języka na drugi. Jednakże w dzisiejszych czasach słowniki przybierają różnorodne formy – od tradycyjnej papierowej publikacji książkowej po CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, flashdrive, aplikację na telefon komórkowy lub stronę internetową. Taka sytuacja daje współczesnym studentom ogromny wybór co do rodzaju i formy słownika jaki mogą używać przygotowując się do zajęć w domu. Mając na uwadze to zjawisko chciałem dowiedzieć się jak nowocześni lub jak tradycyjni są współcześni studenci przy wyborze słowników, które używają regularnie. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia wyniki ankiety dotyczącej tego zagadnienia przeprowadzonej wśród grupy studentów pierwszego roku studiów stacjonarnych pierwszego stopnia Filologii Angielskiej na Uniwersytecie Pedagogicznym w Krakowie.