

The Effect of Dictionary Usage on EFL Test Performance Compared with Student and Teacher Attitudes and Expectations¹

Marsha Bensoussan and Donald Sim

University of Haifa, Israel

and

Razelle Weiss

Ben Gurion University of the Negev, Israel

This paper reports the results of 3 studies, designed to discover whether the use or non-use of dictionaries had an effect on students' performance on EFL reading tests. The general conclusion is that, when given the choice, students preferred to use bi-lingual dictionaries, but that the use of dictionaries had no significant effect on students' test scores. The results of a questionnaire administered to both students and teachers to ascertain dictionary use and preferences is also reported.

INTRODUCTION

A. Context of the Problem

The effect of dictionary usage on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) test performance is a controversial topic in Israeli institutions of higher learning. Teachers generally regard both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries as necessary tools for effective reading comprehension. Students of EFL are expected to know how to use bilingual dictionaries without specific guidance, but they are taught to use monolingual (English-English) dictionaries in order to give students more practice working in the English language.

Administrators of examinations argue that to allow students to use dictionaries invalidates the purpose of the reading comprehension test itself; dictionary definitions might "give away" some of the answers. They claim, moreover, that when searching for word meanings, the student wastes precious time that would be better spent concentrating on the text as a whole. Use of the dictionary, they also argue, tends to add an opportunity for unscrupulous test takers to note down and transmit relevant information. Some teachers actively discourage use of dictionaries, both monolingual and bilingual, in the EFL classroom. They reason that while giving students a list of synonyms, dictionaries do not, in fact, help students fit words into their situational or notional contexts. Some teachers feel that students use dictionaries as a crutch and therefore fail to develop their own self-confidence and guessing abilities when reading.

Marsha BENSOUSSAN is a lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages at Haifa University. From 1972 to 1983 she was responsible for EFL testing. Donald SIM is a senior lecturer in the Department of English, Haifa University. He holds a PhD from Manchester University, and is co-author of 2 volumes in the Collins ELT Academic Study Skills series. Razelle WEISS is a lecturer in the Department of English as a Foreign Language at Ben Gurion University of the Negev. She is currently doing research on immigrants' use of language after some time in their new country. The authors may be contacted c/o Bensoussan, Haifa University, Mount Carmel, Haifa 31 999, Israel.

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In contrast, many teachers of EFL reason that the purpose of the reading comprehension test, given under controlled examination conditions, is not a memory test. It tests, rather, whether a student can disentangle the meaning of a passage of academic prose in the most natural reading situation, i.e., with the use, where needed, of a dictionary of his choice. The purpose of such a test, they argue, is to measure his ability to read and understand academic prose containing lexical items which he might well not have come across in his EFL courses, or could not reasonably be expected to remember, and which he would have to guess with the help of context. Thus, if dictionaries are used in reading situations in the classroom and at home, then they should also be used to read a text within a test situation.

B. Current Views

Most of the literature deals with the monolingual English-English dictionary. Marckwardt (1973: 369) explains why teachers should use them in the EFL classroom:

Dictionaries often supply information about the language not found elsewhere. Dictionaries often supply information about grammar, usage, status, synonym discrimination, application of derivative affixes, and distinctions between spoken and written English not generally treated in textbooks, even in a rudimentary fashion.

And Valette (1977: 197-8) gives a series of exercises in selecting the appropriate definition from the context, which teachers can use for teaching or testing purposes.

Although dictionary definitions have been criticised as being difficult even for the native reader (Neubauer 1981), a preference for the monolingual dictionary is expressed by Baxter (1980: 325): "Whereas a bilingual dictionary tends to encourage the employment of a single lexical item, the monolingual dictionary demonstrates that definition is an alternative." Again, the important point is that students use the dictionary to work within the target language.

Elliot (1972: 178) claims:

Pupils should be initiated into the use of an English dictionary. It is not easy to use a dictionary until one has a certain knowledge of the language ... Initiate means: 1) ... they should have some practice in finding a word quickly. 2) Where more than one definition or synonym is provided, they need practice in discovering which is relevant to the context in question. 3) They need some direct instructions in the use and misuse of the dictionary; its use, as an aid to reading and as an instrument for checking words they use in writing; its misuse as a quarry for language and impressive words to be learned by heart.

Scholfield (1982) also argues that, far from being a mechanical process, use of the dictionary involves the prior knowledge of the reader and his ability to make hypotheses about the context while reading. Using the dictionary, then, is an essential part of the reading process.

Not all researchers share this view, however. Broadhurst (1978: 8) criticises students' use of dictionaries, whether monolingual or bilingual:

Students will use their English/Arabic dictionaries as crutches, looking up every word they do not know. We have seen our students rely on the dictionary when they should be guessing from context.

Arguing against the use of dictionaries, Rainsbury (1976: 199-200) uncompromisingly states:

I do not ban dictionaries, but I discourage their use and try to persuade the student that, in class at least, he can do better without one. Bilingual dictionaries are the places where the players of the synonym games get their ammunition. Dictionaries with definitions in the target language are often written with such exquisite care that it takes one who already knows the meaning of the word to understand the definition.

Some teachers, then, prefer to teach vocabulary in the context of social situations or written texts. The use of context to teach vocabulary, however, does not seem to be entirely effective. One reason may be that the reader must be in a position to use the context, something which may be difficult even for those reading in a native language. Goodman (1969: 17-18) observes:

As he strives to recreate the message, the reader utilizes his experiential conceptual background to create a meaning context. If the reader lacks relevant knowledge, he cannot supply this semantic component and he cannot read. In this sense, all readers regardless of their general reading proficiency are incapable of reading some material in their native language.

Gove (1969: 198) also agrees that students need to bring with them a basic knowledge of the surrounding context when looking up a word in the dictionary:

Words do not exist by themselves — they are surrounded by other words and live in a context of association and related ideas from which a consultor (the student) takes to the dictionary some little bit of understanding.

According to Johns (1980: 9):

... there seems to be a 'threshold effect' by which, when more than approximately 50 per 1,000 words are unknown, perception of overall structure may be effectively blocked, which in turn means that there is not enough in the way of context to allow successful guessing.

In other words, in order for students to guess, they need to have a wide enough basic context from which to operate.

Research on lexical guessing in context by Bensoussan and Laufer (1984) indicates that, on the whole, the amount of correctness of students' lexical guessing is overrated by both teachers and students of EFL themselves. In addition, when students believe that they already know the meaning of familiar words or polysemes, they do not bother to use the dictionary, even when circumstances permit (Laufer and Bensoussan 1982). Instead of using the context to help them understand a particular word, students are likely to alter the meaning of the context so that it is in keeping with the word they mistakenly think they know. Their preconceived notions about a familiar word may hinder their understanding of the larger context.

C. Present Studies

In a pilot study by Bensoussan to ascertain the effect of dictionary use on students' performance on a reading comprehension test, ten different passages with multiple-choice questions were administered to approximately 900 first-year students at Haifa University. Half the students were permitted to use English-English dictionaries, the others were not. There was no significant difference in test scores between those who used the dictionary and those who did not.²

The present researchers found these results surprising and considered that it was time to begin to gather systematic experimental data on the subject of dictionary usage by advanced learners of EFL. As a point of departure, it was decided to investigate the effects of both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries on reading comprehension tests with multiple-choice questions.

Three separate studies, carried out independently at Ben Gurion and Haifa Universities between 1977 and 1979, tested students of the same level of English proficiency who were enrolled in parallel courses of English reading comprehension. The reading proficiency of these students, who had already studied seven years of English in high school, was on a fairly advanced level. Most had also received guidance in how to use a monolingual English dictionary in high school as well as at the University level.

The main purposes of these studies were to determine:

1. to what extent the use of monolingual and/or bilingual dictionaries affects examination performance (i.e., test scores);
2. to what extent the use of dictionaries affects the amount of time taken to complete the test.

STUDY I: BEN GURION UNIVERSITY OF THE NEGEV

1. Students

Nine EFL classes, totalling 91 students, participated. These were mostly first-year students of Sciences and Humanities enrolled in the 50-hour advanced EFL course at the University. More than half were native speakers of Hebrew. Other native languages, in descending order of frequency, were Arabic, Spanish, Russian and French. Students tested had had the equivalent of seven years of high school English. (See Appendix 1) Tests were administered after 40 hours of instruction.

2. Test Administration

Each student received the same 3-hour test battery of three texts (500-700 words each) with 10 multiple-choice questions for each text. Each text was read under one of 3 conditions: (a) without a dictionary (b) with a monolingual dictionary (c) with a bilingual dictionary, the conditions being selected randomly.

²We are grateful to Dr Baruch Nevo, Department of Psychology, and the University Selection and Assessment Unit, Haifa University, for having engineered and provided facilities for the experiment.

Students were allotted a total of 60 minutes for each test. For the first 20 minutes, students were given the text and asked to indicate, by means of a check mark (✓), each unknown word they intended to look up in the dictionary. They were then given the ten questions, and indicated the words which were actually looked up in the dictionary during the test by drawing a box around the word. They also indicated the part of speech of the unknown word. (At this point, students not using the dictionary indicated words they would have liked to look up.) For this part of the test, students were given 40 minutes. This procedure was carried out for each of the two subsequent tests.

3. Data Analysis

For each text, test scores were compared according to the condition under which it was read, i.e. monolingual dictionary, bilingual dictionary, or no dictionary. The type of dictionary was also compared with the number of words students indicated that they intended to look up, and with the number of words students indicated that were actually looked up. Dictionary type was also compared with frequency of the different parts of speech of the words indicated. Students were classified by their test scores into three levels: High, Medium and Low.

4. Results³

Dictionary use did not appear to affect test scores. No significant difference was found among test scores of each of the three texts, regardless of which dictionary type was used or not used. (One-way ANOVA, $p = ns$)

There was a difference between words actually looked up during the test and those unknown words that students indicated, during the 20-minute pre-reading session before the test, they would like to look up. Apparently, motivation for looking up words arose from the need for answering the question, not the desire purely to understand the text.

Few words were actually looked up in the different dictionaries (monolingual dictionary: mean = 5 words, bilingual dictionary: mean = 13 words), regardless of the number of words students had indicated that they wished to look up (monolingual: mean = 55 words, bilingual: mean = 62 words, no dictionary: mean = 68 words). However, when students used the bilingual dictionary, they tended to look up more words than when using the monolingual dictionary.

Students were divided into levels of proficiency, depending on their total scores on the test battery of the three texts: High, Medium, and Low. No significant differences were found among the groups between the number of words marked unknown and the number actually looked up, and the kinds of parts of speech looked up. (One-way ANOVA, $p = ns$).

³A detailed statistical breakdown of results of Studies I, II and III may be obtained from the authors.

STUDY II: HAIFA UNIVERSITY

1. Students

Subjects at Haifa University were first year students of the Humanities enrolled in the required 100-hour advanced course in EFL reading comprehension, a total of approximately 670 students. They had already studied seven years of English in high school. The English proficiency of these students was of a similar level to those at Ben Gurion University. The native language of most students was Hebrew, with Arabic spoken by most of the others. A smaller proportion had a variety of mother tongues, including Russian, French, and Spanish. (See Appendix 1).

2. Test Administration

Tests were administered at the end of the first semester, after 50 hours of instruction. Since these were compulsory departmental examinations for a large body of students and had to be administered over a period of several days, five equivalent tests were given in order to avoid cheating. The tests were shown to be approximately equivalent by the median of their marks. Each student received a text (600-800 words) with 20 multiple-choice questions. Students were allowed up to 120 minutes to complete the test and were permitted to choose a dictionary. Students indicated the time (number of minutes) spent taking the test and the choice of dictionary (monolingual, bilingual, or none).

3. Data Analysis

The number of students using bilingual or monolingual dictionaries, or not using dictionaries, was tabulated. Mean scores for each test, and each type of dictionary, were calculated. The median time (number of minutes) needed to finish each test, according to each type of dictionary, was calculated.

STUDY III: REPLICATION, HAIFA UNIVERSITY

This study was carried out because the researchers at Haifa University, being sceptical of the results, decided to verify them. The following year, another group, consisting of 740 students in the required EFL reading comprehension course, received eight different tests (each student taking only one of the eight). The test conditions were identical to those of Study II. A comparison of the variables in each of the three studies appears in Appendix 1.

RESULTS OF STUDIES II & III

1. Choice of Dictionary

Of the 670 and 740 students who indicated their choice of dictionary in Studies II and III, more than half (59% and 58% respectively) chose to use bilingual dictionaries, whereas there were approximately 20% who used monolingual dictionaries and 21% did not use any dictionary. (See Appendix 1). Where there was free choice, then, students showed a distinct preference for bilingual dictionaries. Of those students not using dictionaries at all, some students decided they did not need a dictionary because it was too time-consuming, while others simply forgot to bring them and would really have preferred to use a dictionary.

2. Effect of Dictionary on Test Score

As indicated by the results, the crucial question, whether the student's use of a dictionary affects his score on the test, appears to be answered in the negative, as in Study I. Except in the case of one text, no significant relation was found between students' test scores and dictionary use. It did not seem to make any difference on the test whether a student used a bilingual dictionary, a monolingual dictionary, or no dictionary at all.

3. Effect of Dictionary on Time

Another question was whether using a dictionary would measurably affect the time taken to complete the test. For most of the tests in Studies II and III, there was no significant relation between the dictionary used (or not used) and the time needed to complete the test. There was a tendency, however, for students who used no dictionary at all to finish fastest. Similarly, users of bilingual dictionaries tended to be slowest.

4. Time Taken v Score

Subjects' scores on the tests and the time they took to complete the tests were compared, using a Pearson correlation. For three of the five tests, the correlation was not significant, but for the other two a small negative correlation was found. Thus there appears to be a tendency for the slower students (i.e., those taking more time to complete the test) to get the lower marks.

We might infer, therefore, that students who choose to use bilingual dictionaries tend to be slower and weaker in taking reading comprehension tests in English and, by extension, in reading English texts. In contrast, students who choose to use a monolingual dictionary, or no dictionary at all, might be expected to read faster (i.e., take less time to complete the test), and be better students (i.e., achieve higher marks on the test). These conclusions, however, are speculative and must be supported by further research.

QUESTIONNAIRE

To attempt to clarify the test results and to understand the underlying attitudes and expectations of dictionary users, the researchers at Haifa University administered a questionnaire on dictionary usage and preferences to 404 first-year students in the required English reading comprehension course, to ten of their teachers, and to another small group of thirteen third-year Psychology students whose English proficiency was of a very high standard. The Questionnaire appears as Appendix II.

Students' responses were tabulated according to (Q1) native language; (Q5) type of dictionary used at home; and (Q4) frequency of use. Some of the more important findings are discussed below.⁴

More Proficient Students use Dictionary Less

The third year students, who were the most linguistically proficient, were most critical about dictionaries and had fewer expectations. They use dictionaries less but more selectively than first-year students. Almost half do not expect the dictionary to affect their test scores.

⁴A detailed account of responses to the questionnaire may be obtained from the authors.

Some students said that they did not use any dictionary during the test because they believe that time spent looking up words and deciding on their meanings takes away from time better spent answering test questions.

Many Students Cannot Use Dictionaries Efficiently

The results showed that many first-year students think they merely need to look up words in order to understand the text; they do not realise that because of a lack of sense of sentence structure and parts of speech, they may not understand the sentence, even if they understand each word. Third year students and teachers are much more aware of this problem.

Those first year students who do complain about the monolingual dictionary say that the definitions contain too many difficult, unknown words which in turn have to be looked up as well. Some say that even after referring to the monolingual dictionary, they often have to turn to the bilingual dictionary if they really wish to understand the word.

There is also frustration with the great number of meanings given, and the inability to find the exact meaning required by the context. In a test situation, all this is very time consuming.

On the other hand, students' use of bilingual dictionaries may or may not be any more satisfactory. Bilingual dictionaries often fail to give complete definitions or to include enough idioms. Moreover, in many cases, students still have to choose from among a wide range of meanings, to understand the context.

Teachers' Awareness of Student Needs

According to the questionnaire, teachers of first-year students do not think students use dictionaries effectively. They generally express dissatisfaction with their students' ability to use the dictionary systematically or accurately enough for academic reading purposes. They are aware that looking up a word may not always help the student to understand the context of the sentence or paragraph, but they do expect the use of dictionaries to significantly affect test scores.

There appeared to be few discrepancies among teachers' opinions, the results of Studies II and III, and students' answers on the questionnaires.

According to responses to Q6, the general feeling, among students and teachers alike, was that if it made any difference at all in their speed of reading, use of a dictionary would probably slow them down. On the other hand, teachers predicted that students use the dictionary more often in class than they claimed that they actually do; moreover, students claimed to use more monolingual dictionaries than teachers expect.

A Student's Eye View

Using the information from the questionnaire, we can hypothesise about how most students go about using the dictionary during a test.

While reading the text, the student comes across an unknown word. The more confident student will try to ignore the fact that it is unknown and fit it into the context. If it fits, he will continue reading. If it doesn't fit, he may turn to the dictionary.

His first problem is coping with the order of the English letters, which is different from Hebrew and Arabic. Once he has found the word, he tries to understand the definitions. Only the more proficient students will be concerned with the part of speech of the unknown word in the sentence. At any rate, the first stage of looking up the word is slow.

The student may then be faced with a number of meanings, and sometimes even with a number of dictionary entries for a particular word. He is thus faced with two problems: he must decipher the meanings of the definition, sometimes referring back to the dictionary for different parts of the same definition, and he must also choose which of the definitions given is appropriate to the context.

That is, even after he has successfully deciphered the meaning of the definition(s), once he goes back to the context, he may find that none of the definitions fit. Definitions may be too long and confusing or too short. There may not be enough examples, synonyms, or idioms to give the student a feeling of the various connotations of the word. Nuances of register may not be given. All these problems leave the student with a feeling of frustration. For this reason, many students do not get beyond the first definition given, and then give up. It is no wonder, then, that many students are sceptical.

CONCLUSIONS

Before conducting this research we had entertained a number of assumptions about the use of dictionaries, which we believe would be shared by many people working in the EFL field. These assumptions may be summarised as follows:

1. All students would prefer to avail themselves of the opportunity to use a dictionary during a test when permitted.
2. The permitted use of monolingual and/or bilingual dictionaries would significantly raise examination scores.
3. The use of dictionaries would significantly increase the time taken to complete a test.
4. Less proficient students would prefer to use bilingual dictionaries and would use them more than more proficient students.
5. More proficient students would use the dictionary less than less proficient students because, having a larger vocabulary, they would not need to refer to the dictionary so often.
6. Students are able to use dictionaries effectively to find appropriate word meanings according to context.
7. Teachers are aware of students' needs and limitations in using dictionaries.

The results bore out some of the assumptions and contradicted others. According to the three studies, the use of a dictionary has no significant effect on reading comprehension test scores based on multiple-choice questions. Neither does its use affect the time students need to complete the test. Moreover, even when permitted to use a dictionary, many students (mostly those with relatively high English proficiency) did not wish to do so.

Assumptions 4 and 5 were proved correct, however; less proficient students did indeed need to use dictionaries more than better students. These students were also users of bilingual dictionaries, whereas the better students preferred monolingual dictionaries.

Teachers were more critical of their students' abilities to use dictionaries. They did not agree with our assumption 6, that students can use dictionaries effectively. Students themselves, however, generally thought that they could.

Answers to the questionnaire bore out assumption 7 and showed that teachers are aware of students' needs and the limitations of using dictionaries. However, most teachers did expect dictionaries to help students increase their test scores, and here they (as much as we) were proved wrong.

The discrepancies between our assumptions, the answers to the questionnaires, and the test results show that dictionary usage is an area in which there are many misconceptions. The question as to why no difference was found in test scores, whether or not students used dictionaries, has still not been answered. Indeed, given the large number of variables, the cause (or causes) can only be guessed at.

One explanation could be that students simply do not know how to use the dictionary efficiently during an examination. In this case, by definition, test results would not be affected. This interpretation, however, is both too simplistic and too pessimistic to be useful.

Another, more complex explanation focusses on the proportion of known to unknown words in the text. In a test situation, it is assumed that students understand most of the words in the text, and that they will use the strategies of deduction or contextual guessing to comprehend the rest. Recent research, however, shows that this assumption is not necessarily true. Unless there is a minimum basic context of known words, accurate guessing will not occur. If there are too many unknown words, then the larger context is not clear.

It can also be assumed that less proficient students lack many of the syntactic language rules by which words and sentences are put together. Without these rules, a working knowledge of the missing or unknown words cannot be guessed, even with the help of a dictionary. On the other hand, more proficient students, who should be able to use the dictionary more efficiently, can probably do without its help when answering test questions.

Thus the status quo stands: less proficient students lack the language skills to benefit from the dictionary, whereas more proficient students know enough to do without it. The dictionary can be used in a test situation only to fill in places where the context is already clear, not to create context.

The implications for the teacher are to increase students' awareness of word families, parts of speech, and sentence structure when working with the dictionary. Teachers can help students distinguish which words are likely to be important, so that students can focus their attention on those and avoid looking up every unknown word, whether or not its meaning is crucial for comprehension of the text as whole.

The results of these studies can be applied to point out misconceptions about students' use of dictionaries and to modify users' expectations. Whether or not to permit the use of dictionaries during a test, however, is still an open question.

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APPENDIX 1: COMPARISON OF VARIABLES IN DICTIONARY STUDIES I, II, III

Variables	Study I - Ben Gurion	Study II - Haifa	Study III - Replication - Haifa
Multiple-choice tests:			
total no. of texts	3	5	8
no. questions per text	10	20	20
Total no. of students	91	670	740
No. of texts read by each student	3	1	1
Time (no. of minutes)	60	30-110	30-110
Length (no. of words)	500-700	600-800	600-800
Native language:			
Hebrew	58%		71%
Arabic	16%		18%
Other	26%		11%
Dictionary:			
Bilingual	33.3%	59%	58%
Monolingual	33.3%	20%	21%
None	33.3%	21%	21%
Use of dictionary and time determined by	researcher	students	students

APPENDIX 2: QUESTIONNAIRE ON STUDENTS' DICTIONARY USAGE

Name of Student

Name of Teacher

Identity Number

1. Native Language

1

Arabic

2

Hebrew

3

Other

2. Do you bring a dictionary to class?

0	never
1	sometimes
2	often
3	always

3. Which dictionary do you bring to class?

0	no dictionary
1	English-English dictionary
2	bilingual dictionary

4. Do you do your homework with a dictionary?

0	never
1	sometimes
2	often
3	always

5. Which dictionary do you use to do your homework?

0	no dictionary
1	English-English dictionary
2	bilingual dictionary

6. When I use the dictionary

1	I can read faster
2	I can read slower and more carefully
0	there is no difference in the speed of my reading

7. When I use a dictionary I can understand sentences better because
I understand each word.

although I understand each word I don't
always understand the meaning of the sentence.

both of the above statements may be true.

1
2
3

8. When I use the dictionary I look for

1	every word I'm not sure of.
2	only the words I really don't know. (I try to guess the words I'm not sure of.)
3	only the most important words. (I try to guess the others.)
4	only the longest, most difficult words.

9. Do you also use the dictionary for any of the following purposes?

spelling (also British and American variations)	1
punctuation	2
short forms and abbreviations	3
idioms and special phrases	4
examples of usage	5
synonyms and antonyms (words of similar and words of opposite meaning)	6
possible range and register of usage (formal, slang, regional variations, etc)	7
part of speech (noun, verb, preposition, etc)	8
verb patterns	9
pronunciation	0

10. (a) Are you, on the whole, satisfied with your ability to use an English - English dictionary?

Yes	1
No	2

10. (b) If “No,” can you briefly explain in what ways you are not satisfied:

.....

.....

.....

11. (a) On the whole, are you satisfied with the information provided in the English - English dictionary you use?

Yes

1

No

2

11. (b) If “No,” can you briefly explain in what ways you are not satisfied?

.....

.....

.....

12. If I use a dictionary during a test, my mark will be higher.

Yes

1

No

2

13. END OF SEMESTER GRADE

in the regular course