

Marjeta Urbinc

University of Ljubljana

Faculty of Arts, English Department

An Empirical Study of Dictionary Use: the Case of Slovenia

Summary

The article presents the results of the first research into dictionary use conducted in Slovenia on a sample of 70 students from the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Slovenia. The first part investigates the profile of the students as dictionary users, their level of knowledge, and describes the questionnaire used in the study. The second part presents the results of individual tasks with an emphasis on dictionary use and compares the achievements of test subjects from both faculties, while the final part deals with the causes for these differences and proposes steps that could be taken to increase student and teacher awareness concerning dictionary use and dictionary skills.

Key words: dictionary testing, users' reference skills, general monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

Empirična raziskava rabe slovarjev pri rojenih govorcih slovenščine

Povzetek

V članku so predstavljeni rezultati prve študije rabe slovarjev, izvedene v Sloveniji. Študija je vključevala 70 študentov Ekonomske fakultete in Filozofske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani. V prvem delu članka je opisana skupina, na kateri je bila študija izvedena, nivo njihovega jezikovnega znanja in vprašalnik, ki smo ga uporabili v študiji. Drugi del obravnava rezultate posameznih nalog, pri čemer je poudarek na rabi slovarjev, vključena pa je tudi primerjava rezultatov študentov obeh fakultet. V zadnjem delu so navedeni razlogi za razlike med obema skupinama in predlogi za izboljšanje rabe slovarjev s strani učiteljev in študentov.

Ključne besede: testiranje rabe slovarjev, sposobnost uporabnikov za iskanje informacij, splošni enojezični in dvojezični slovarji

An Empirical Study of Dictionary Use: the Case of Slovenia

1. Introduction

In the last two decades, a number of research projects have been conducted investigating users' reference skills and needs, as well as users' habits in the field of dictionary use. The conference *Dictionaries and their Users*, which was organized by Reinhard Hartmann in the late 1970s, initiated a period of more intensive dictionary testing. Jerzy Tomaszczyk (1979) was the first to study the foreign users of dictionaries more thoroughly and was soon followed by Béjoint (1981), who based his investigation partly on Tomaszczyk's (Cowie 1999, 175–98). Later in the 1980s and 1990s, various researchers carried out studies concerning different aspects of dictionary needs, skills and use. The focus was on many areas of interest, such as definitions, illustrative examples, labels, grammatical information, and inclusion of phraseological units; and the trend still continues (Béjoint 1981; Hartmann 1989; Nuccorini 1992; Bogaards 1992, 1994; Nesi 1994; Atkins and Varantola 1998; Dolezal and McCreary 1999; Cowie 1999; Tono 2001; Bogaards and van der Kloot 2001; Al-Ajmi 2002; Campoy Cubillo 2002; Nesi and Hail 2002; Wingate 2002). Consequently, monolingual learners' dictionaries have improved a great deal, which can be seen if we compare the last editions of, e.g., *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* (OALD) or *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) to mention just the British learners' dictionaries with the longest tradition. The oldest among the learners' dictionaries, OALD, has seen six revised editions since 1948. It was followed by the LDOCE in 1978, which has been revised three times so far. In 1987, the *Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary* (COBUILD) was first published, introducing many changes to the microstructure. In 1995, the above-mentioned leading monolingual learners' dictionaries were all revised and another learners' dictionary, the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (CIDE), was first published; in 2003 it appeared in a revised edition. The *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (MED), another monolingual dictionary for foreign learners, was first published in 2002. But has there also been improvement in users' capacity to make full use of these books?

In Slovenia, no study has ever been carried out concerning dictionary users and their use of dictionaries. This article presents the investigation conducted in order to find out what kind of dictionaries users possess, how often and how effectively they use them, what they usually look up in their dictionaries, and what they would like to find in their dictionaries but is not included.

The investigation was a general type of research which did not concentrate on one particular aspect of dictionary use because it seems appropriate to start with a general research objective, rather than to address a more specialized issue.

1. Description of the study

Test Subjects: The study was carried out among second- and third-year students of the Faculty of Economics – they can be regarded as general dictionary users – and second-year students of the Faculty of Arts, Department of English – they are future professional users of dictionaries who will often have to consult them in their career as teachers or translators.

Level of Knowledge: All the test subjects studied English in primary school, in grammar school and at the university. They had the same number of English lessons per year and covered the same syllabus.

Test Design: The questionnaire consisted of two parts (cf. Atkins and Varantola 1998): a Dictionary user profile form and a Dictionary research test. The first part was aimed at obtaining information about the dictionary users, i.e. their mother tongue, how long they have been studying English, and their grades in grammar school. The next few questions concentrated on the dictionaries they own and their reasons for purchasing these, on the frequency of use of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries, the dictionaries they use for particular tasks (e.g. while reading a text in English, while translating or checking the spelling), and on their preferred dictionary/dictionaries.

Description of the Dictionary research test: In the Dictionary research test, test subjects were asked to list a dictionary or dictionaries they were going to use throughout the test. In some tasks students were encouraged to use dictionaries, whereas in others they were asked not to use them.

Information Prior to the Test: Before completing the questionnaire, the students were acquainted with the aim of the test. We asked them not to use their dictionaries in certain tasks and explained why. When dictionaries were allowed, the students were asked to indicate whether or not a dictionary had been consulted in each particular instance.

2. Results

The Dictionary research test consisted of eight tasks, each comprising several questions. Each task was aimed at testing a specific skill, ability or expectation of a dictionary user.

2.1 Identification of part of speech

Task 1 consisted of six sentences in which students had to identify the part of speech of the word in italics. The majority of the existing monolingual and all of the English-Slovene dictionaries include different parts of speech as separate entries. It is, therefore, necessary for dictionary users to be able to determine the part of speech before looking up a word in a dictionary. In this task dictionaries were not allowed.

Although this is a rather uncomplicated task, the results were not as good as expected, since the percentage of correct answers ranges between 32.5 % and 84.5 %. Neither of the two

groups of students performed well when they were asked to identify the conjunction *after* in the sentence ‘*After* you’d left, I got a phone call from John’: the question was answered correctly by 20 % of the FE students and 45 % of the FA students. Both groups seem to have the fewest problems with the identification of *just* as an adverb in the sentence ‘He has *just* arrived’ (74 % of the FE students, 95 % of the FA students). On the basis of these results it can be assumed that many respondents have difficulty in looking up the right part of speech when consulting their dictionary.

2.2 Recognition of grammatical properties of words

Task 2 tested whether students were aware of certain grammatical restrictions and properties of English words (e.g. transitivity/intransitivity, verb complementation, countability/uncountability, predicative/attributive use). The students were encouraged to use their dictionaries. Correct student answers range from 32.5 % to 86 %. As far as checking words in a dictionary is concerned, only very few students used their dictionaries (from 1 % to 13 %); it seems that their choice of answers may have depended either on their previous knowledge or on their choosing the correct answer by chance rather than on their consulting the dictionary. In the group of FA students, nobody consulted their dictionary in two questions, whereas 20 % of them checked the last example where they had to select the adjective *lone*, used attributively to fill the slot in the sentence ‘_____ women drivers are advised not to pick up hitch hikers’. Fifty-five percent of them gave the correct answer, as opposed to 10 % of the FE students (where only 6 % consulted their dictionaries).

The results concerning the use of dictionaries give cause for concern. Only very few respondents actually consulted their dictionaries, especially in the group of FE students, who obviously found the task much more difficult than the FA students. Only very few respondents actually consulted their dictionaries in both groups, although that factor was less critical among the English majors who were probably more familiar with the grammatical properties of the words in question than were the FE students. Those who did were successful, as only five out of 18 look-ups performed in this task were unsuccessful. Among the dictionaries used, most of the students chose one of the monolingual learners’ dictionaries, but some students also used the ESD, which is much less suitable for this task. The ESD is a passive dictionary intended for native speakers of Slovene when decoding, that is why the emphasis is on the meaning rather than on the grammatical peculiarities of English.

2.3 Lexical items and their expected place in a dictionary

Task 3 tested students’ expectations of where in the dictionary they can find different (multi-word) lexical items (e.g. idioms, phrasal verbs, compounds). The use of dictionaries was not allowed, since students might have believed that the correct answer could be found in their dictionary. This is, of course, not true, since the inclusion of multi-word lexical items and special meanings of, say, plural nouns differs from dictionary to dictionary. Our initial

hypothesis was that students would not consider a multi-word lexical item as a separate entry word. The results of the survey confirm this hypothesis, as only 2 % to 22 % of the respondents regarded a multi-word lexical item as a separate entry word. Sixteen percent of the students would look up the phrasal verb *come through* as a separate entry, but it can be assumed that some students believe that phrasal verbs are independent entries in monolingual learners' dictionaries, although they are included as defined run-ons. The rest of the answers comply with our expectations, i.e. dictionary users try to find a multi-word lexical item under the noun if it contains one.

2.4 Selection of the appropriate prepositional complement

Task 4 tested students' ability to find the correct prepositional complement of various English words. We selected grammatical collocations that present problems for native speakers of Slovene (i.e. grammatical collocations that are different in English and Slovene). If students were not acquainted with the correct preposition, they were supposed to check it in a dictionary. The results show that the FA students were more aware of the fact that the choice of a correct preposition in English poses problems for native speakers of Slovene. As far as performance is concerned, the FA students achieved far better results, which is in accordance with our expectations.

As far as the success of students' look-ups is concerned, the results show that students used monolingual learners' dictionaries as well as the ESD. The majority of students who consulted their dictionaries provided correct answers (38 successful versus 11 unsuccessful look-ups out of 49 look-ups performed).

2.5 Understanding the polysemous words in context

Task 5 tested how well students understand polysemous words in context. The students were asked either to provide the Slovene translational equivalent of the underlined word or to paraphrase it in English. They were allowed to use their dictionaries and here the average percentage of students who used the dictionary is higher than in the previous tasks (up to 55 %).

The question can be asked why students used their dictionaries more often in this particular task than in the previous ones. The answer may be sought in the demands placed upon the students in this task. Task 5 required that the students themselves provide an answer. It is understandable that if they did not understand the meaning of the word in question, they would consult their dictionaries, a pattern of behaviour which complies with our expectation that the dictionary is used while reading an English text and encountering unknown words.

The preferred dictionary in this task seems to have been the ESD. This is understandable, since this was a pure decoding task. Apart from the ESD, other monolingual learners' dictionaries were also used.

2.6 Deciphering the international phonetic alphabet

Task 6 dealt with the IPA, which is used in British monolingual (learners') dictionaries to indicate pronunciation of entry words. This task was included because we hypothesized that a great number of dictionary users in Slovenia cannot read the given pronunciation. To test this assumption, we included six well-known words (i.e. *unimaginative*, *birthplace*, *northern*, *approach*, *breathing*, *showgirl*) written in the IPA to see whether the test subjects are able to read the phonetic symbols. Dictionaries were not allowed. Our initial assumption proved correct for the group of FE students, since the majority either made no attempt to decipher the words or were unable to do so. The percentage of students who gave no answer ranges from 62 % (in *unimaginative*) to as much as 90 % (in *northern* and *showgirl*). As expected, the FA students who had already passed the examination in English phonetics after the first year of study did not really have problems with reading the words written in the IPA (80 % to 95 % answered all the questions correctly). The number of those who did not try to provide any answer at all was also much smaller (from 5 % to 20 %).

Instruction in the IPA is on the English syllabus in grammar schools in Slovenia. Students should, therefore, be acquainted with the symbols, but the results show a completely different picture for the FE students, who can be considered more general users of dictionaries, than for the students of English who are expected to become professionals. It is beyond the scope of this research to find the reasons why so many students from the FE group are unable to read pronunciation. Is it simply because they have forgotten it due to a lack of practice? Or could it be because they did not deal with it in grammar school? These questions remain unanswered.

2.7 Filling the slot in context

Task 7 tested students' ability to find a suitable word to fit the context. Test subjects were allowed to use their dictionaries. The text contained 14 slots that had to be filled with parts of lexical and grammatical collocations.

The results show that neither group really had problems with finding the right word to fill certain slots and in these cases they consulted their dictionaries only very rarely (e.g. questions 7/33, 7/34, 7/39, 7/40, 7/42, 7/44). In questions 7/36 and 7/43 there was a huge gap between the percentage of correct answers (60 % of the FE students but 95 % of the FA students gave the correct answer to question 7/36, and 62 % of the FE students but 100 % of the FA students answered question 7/43 correctly). Here, too, not many students used their dictionaries (10 % and 15 % in question 7/36; 2 % and 0 % in question 7/42). The results of some questions were not as good but in these questions we can see that the percentage of students (especially of English majors) who actually consulted their dictionaries was much higher than in other questions:

- Question 7/35: 44 % of the FE students gave the correct answers (14 % used their dictionaries), 55 % of the FA students gave the correct answer (45 % used their dictionaries)

- Question 7/38: 66 % of the FE students answered this question correctly (6 % consulted their dictionaries), as opposed to 70 % of the FA students (35 % consulted their dictionaries)
- Question 7/45: 48 % of correct answers in the group of FE students (16 % used their dictionaries) and 60 % of correct answers in the group of FA students (60 % used their dictionaries)

Two questions (i.e. 7/37 and 7/41) yielded particularly poor results. In the first of these the students were supposed to find the verb that collocates with the noun *prescription*. In the group of FE students, nobody gave the correct answer, and only 2 % used their dictionaries. Fifteen percent of the FA students answered this question correctly, and only 10 % consulted their dictionaries. A possible reason for such a low percentage of look-ups may be that the students did not really know what to look up in the dictionary – it is the entries for the bases of the collocations that they should have looked up in their monolingual learners' dictionaries in order to find the right collocator that could be inserted into the slot. In question 7/41 (the students were supposed to provide the preposition *against* in the sentence 'The medication is reported to be very effective _____ the common cold'), only 6 % of the FE students answered correctly (no one consulted their dictionary), the percentage of correct answers being just slightly higher in the group of FA students (15 %), where 20 % used the dictionary.

We strongly believe that students should be systematically taught which words in word combinations they should look up if they want to become efficient dictionary users. A specialized dictionary of collocations would be of great help in this task, but this type of dictionary was selected very rarely.

2.8 Selection of the appropriate word

Task 8 tested students' ability to choose the appropriate word from a list of four items to fill the slot in relatively difficult contexts. They were allowed to use their dictionaries.

It can be seen that the percentage of correct answers differs greatly in almost all the questions if we compare the results of the FE and FA students:

- Question 8/47: 24 % of the FE students gave the correct answer (10 % used their dictionaries) and 80 % of the FA students answered the question correctly (35 % used their dictionaries)
- Question 8/49: 30 % of the FE and 75 % of the FA students responded correctly, the percentage of the look-ups being 6 % and 5 %, respectively;
- Question 8/50: in the group of FE students, 46 % answered correctly (36 % consulted their dictionaries), whereas 80 % of the FA students provided the correct answer (40 % consulted their dictionaries);
- Question 8/51: 64 % of the FE students gave the correct answer (46 % used their dictionaries) as opposed to 90 % of the FA students (65 % used their dictionaries).

According to the results concerning the performance of students who used their dictionaries to discern the correct answer to the question, the majority of students managed to find the appropriate information in their dictionaries, but again the FA students were more successful than the FE students.

3. Discussion

When studying dictionary use and the dictionary skills of a particular group of dictionary users, we have to consider the dictionaries our test subjects own and use when completing the questionnaire. We can establish that our respondents possess one of the bilingual English-Slovene and Slovene-English dictionaries available on the market. As regards monolingual dictionaries, some differences can be observed between the groups of students. While most of the FE students possess only one of the monolingual learners' dictionaries, all FA respondents, without exception, claim to own at least one if not more dictionaries of this type. We can see that students, for the most part, own at least one of the existing monolingual learners' dictionaries. The ownership of monolingual dictionaries intended for native speakers, however, reveals a different picture. The majority of the FA students, on the one hand, claim to own at least one dictionary belonging to this group while the FE students rarely list one of these dictionaries. The most astonishing information we obtained as regards the ownership of different types of dictionaries was that not a single FE respondent claimed to possess any specialized dictionary. The FA students, however, own and also use specialized dictionaries, among which they enumerated dictionaries of collocations, idioms and phrasal verbs and a dictionary of pronunciation. Obviously, students become acquainted with specialized dictionaries as late as university, which is late indeed considering the number of years they have been studying English before the university level.

Comparing the total number of students who used a dictionary when completing the questionnaire, we can establish that in the group of FE students who used their dictionaries 68 % managed to answer the question correctly. In the group of FA students 88 % found the correct answer. The number of unsuccessful look-ups in the FE group amounts to 32 % and to 12 % in the FA group. The results show a much better performance by the FA students, which can lead to the conclusion that the dictionary training of the FA students yields positive results in comparison to a group without any specific dictionary training. It must be stressed that all the test subjects attended primary and grammar schools with the same syllabus, so we can justifiably assume that the dictionary training language students receive is useful and helps them find the correct answer in their dictionaries. We strongly believe that a lack of dictionary training is also the reason that the FE students used their dictionaries much less frequently than the FA students while completing the questionnaire.

4. Conclusion

The results presented in this article are based on the first research that has ever been conducted into the dictionary use of Slovene learners of English. It can be regarded as a good starting point for further investigation into more specific areas of dictionary use concerning bilingual as well as monolingual dictionaries, such as the analysis of the micro- and macrostructure of English-Slovene and Slovene-English dictionaries, the ability of users to make good use of various types of information found in bilingual as well as monolingual (learners') dictionaries ranging from grammatical information to the inclusion of phraseological units, the role of definitions and example sentences within dictionary entries.

The study was well accepted by the students who completed the questionnaire. When they were asked to make comments about the questionnaire, they said it was interesting because many of them had never consciously thought about dictionaries as study resources. Not until they were faced with this questionnaire had they believed that dictionaries included so much information. Several respondents expressed their wish to receive special training in dictionary use in order to be able to use their dictionaries more effectively.

We believe it was useful for students to complete such a questionnaire, because some of them did consult their dictionaries and expressed their opinions about them. It is a matter for concern, however, that they are still not willing to use their dictionaries more often – it is only in this way that they become familiar with them, their layout and the variety of information they contain – and finally become more efficient dictionary users. More effort should be devoted to the development of dictionary skills and more time should be spent on teaching dictionary use in grammar schools; however, teachers of English should first be trained in how to do it and convinced of the necessity of teaching dictionary skills.

One of the most important findings of this study is that students should be made aware of the full range of dictionaries, from general-purpose to specialized dictionaries in order to be able to choose the appropriate dictionary when solving their linguistic problems. This should be accomplished especially by raising teacher awareness of the importance of teaching dictionary skills. It would be useful to integrate special exercises designed to teach and learn dictionary skills into coursebooks, so that students acquire the knowledge necessary for effective dictionary use in the course of the educational process. In order to raise teacher awareness, special courses should be offered as part of language degree programmes at universities, which is currently not the case in Slovenia. Apart from that, lectures as well practical workshops dealing with how to teach dictionary skills would be useful for Slovene foreign language teachers and could be organized as in-service courses.

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- CIDE *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*
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