

# An Investigation into the Dictionary Use and Look-up Behaviour of Foundation Year Chinese Students in a Language Centre at a Sino-British University in China

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*This study looked at the dictionary look-up behaviour of Foundation Year undergraduate Chinese students at a Sino-British university in China. 76 students took part in an experiment using the MacMillan monolingual dictionary in order to determine their ability to look up the correct meaning of unfamiliar words in a reading text. Two questionnaires, one given before and the other after the reading task, were also used to gain an insight into students' dictionary ownership and use. The results show that around 55% of students use a monolingual dictionary more than once a week, and 80% of students use their mobile phones with a bilingual dictionary function at least once a week, with more than 70% of these students using this type of dictionary daily. The results also reveal that all students who took part in the task were unable to choose the correct meaning of at least one word they looked up in the dictionary. This has wider implications as teachers should understand that students may need their guidance on choosing and using dictionaries as it cannot be assumed that using a dictionary results in students understanding a vocabulary item.*

## Background

At Xi'an Jiaotong–Liverpool University (XJTLU), all Foundation Year students receive a hardback copy of the Macmillan monolingual Dictionary for Advanced Learners as part of their course materials since much of the existing literature surrounding dictionaries supports the use of a monolingual dictionary rather than a bilingual dictionary. This study was in response to a question that had arisen regarding whether students actually *used* this dictionary, and then went on to further investigate how they used this and other dictionaries, as well as their ability to choose the correct meaning of the words they looked up.

## Literature review

### *Dictionary use*

The importance of dictionaries and, hence, the understanding of their uses and users can be summed up by Stein (2002) who remarks 'it is undeniable that every L2 learner uses a dictionary at some stage' (p. ix). The dictionary is clearly a crucial second-language learning tool for every second- and foreign-language learner. Debate exists as to whether students should be encouraged to use a dictionary at all when reading. Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984), for example, believe that ESL learners should be discouraged from using a dictionary in general as this prevents them practicing the ability to guess words from context. Possibly, for most ESL learners, and Chinese students in particular, a dictionary is a much leaned-on crutch. Chi (2002) points out that the dictionary has 'always enjoyed a high status in Chinese culture, being regarded as a teacher who cannot talk' (p. 355).

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As the dictionary is an 'instrument for learning a second or foreign language' (Fan, 2000), much research has been conducted into language learners' dictionaries, which has in turn improved the quality of these dictionaries. In one study, Nesi (2002) investigated how international students at British universities use dictionaries. During a 3 year period, she assigned six groups of students a dictionary task which required them to reveal how they had used dictionaries when engaging in a reading task. She was able to analyse 89 students who were asked a series of questions requiring a written answer both before and after completing a reading task. She asked them questions relating to how they felt about looking up words in a dictionary and which dictionaries they used. The results showed that although most students were competent and able to decide on the correct meaning over 50 percent of the subjects chose the wrong meaning for at least 1 of the consultations. An interesting finding was that many of the subjects were unaware of the errors they made in interpreting the words.

Another study by Fan (2000) investigated the behaviour of students in Hong Kong universities when using bilingualised dictionaries.<sup>1</sup> She aimed to find out how frequently students used dictionaries and how the information contained in these dictionaries was perceived by these students. It was found that students with a higher level of English proficiency made more use of bilingualised dictionaries.

### **Dictionary consultation process**

Hartmann (2001) describes the look-up process as a number of stages ranging from perceiving a linguistic problem and a need to solve it, deciding on the words to be looked up and searching for the information, and integrating that information with the linguistic situation where the problem has occurred. Nesi (2003) also produced a taxonomy of reference skills at university level in which she divided dictionary use into a number of stages. Her study was only concerned with stages 1-4 however, as stage 5 involves recording the words looked up, a step that this research was not concerned

with. The stages are:

1. Before study
2. Before consultation
3. Locating information
4. Interpreting entry information

### **Research questions**

RQ 1: What types of dictionaries do students use?

RQ 2: Do students use a paper monolingual dictionary both generally and when reading a text?

RQ3: How successful are students in looking up the correct meaning of words they meet when reading a text?

### **Procedure**

The research instrument comprised a pre-exercise and a post-exercise questionnaire, which both contained mainly closed questions but did have at least one open question. The first questionnaire asked students a number of questions about the dictionaries they owned, and how often, where and for what purpose they used them. They were then given a short reading text with instructions stating that they should read the text, but only a maximum of 5 words in total were allowed to be checked in a dictionary. A follow-up, or post-exercise, questionnaire dealt with the dictionaries they had used to comprehend the reading text, their level of satisfaction with these dictionaries and any problems they may have encountered.

### **Results and analysis**

The surveys saw a high response rate (99%) with 73 students answering the pre-task questionnaire, 67 (90%) completing the reading task, and 52 (70%) answering the post-reading questionnaire.

#### ***Pre-reading task questionnaire: dictionary ownership and use***

In relation to students' use of dictionaries, (RQ1), the results reveal that the dictionary

<sup>1</sup> *Bilingualised dictionaries contain the monolingual information about a word and its translation into the learner's other tongue (Laufer and Kimmel, 1997).*

used most frequently is a bilingual dictionary application on their mobile phone, with 85% of students stating that they use this type of dictionary more than once a week (Appendix 1). The results also show that 70% of these students used their mobile phone dictionaries daily. The questionnaire did not probe the reasons for this being the most popular type of dictionary but this was investigated in a previous unpublished study by the researcher who found the overwhelming reason was the sheer convenience of having a mobile phone to hand.<sup>2</sup>

Students also appear to use online dictionaries frequently, as nearly 60% stated that they use them daily, with another 30% using them once a week. Electronic bilingual dictionaries also appear to be popular, as around 68% of students report using this type of dictionary once a week or more.

To address RQ2, the results show that around 18% of students used the MacMillan monolingual dictionary daily, with 40% reporting using it at least once a week, and 25% using it once a month or more. In earlier studies it was clear that one of the barriers to

using the Macmillan monolingual dictionary was the inconvenience of carrying it to and from class, as it is bulky and heavy.

The results also clearly show the reasons students use their dictionaries. Although all students report using a dictionary to check the meaning, spelling, pronunciation, word family and examples of a word being used, the results corroborate an earlier study conducted by Nesi and Hail (2002) which found that the main reason students use a dictionary is to check the meaning of a word (Appendix 2). Over 75% of students claim to use a dictionary most often to check meanings.

### Reading task

Students looked up a total of 31 different words among them. Figure 1 gives some examples of the words looked up, and the number of students who got the correct meaning, and those who did not, in the context of the reading text.

The words looked up by students were checked against the word frequency lists and dictionary from the Corpus of Contemporary

Figure 1.

Word	Number of students with correct meaning	Number of students with incorrect meaning
<i>alleviate</i>	36	0
<i>fiasco</i>	34	4
<i>terminal</i>	21	13
<i>descend</i>	7	36
<i>cope</i>	7	0
<i>handle</i>	3	1

Figure 2.

Number of incorrect look-ups	Number of students	Percentage of students
0	17	27%
1	27	42%
2	17	27%
3	2	3%
4	1	1%
5	0	0%

<sup>2</sup> Doubts as to whether dictionaries on mobile phones are of sufficient quality will be discussed in the later sections of this investigation.

American English. This is a corpus of words showing the 5000 most commonly occurring words in the English language. The word which was most frequently looked up by students, 'alleviate,' was not found in this list, so it is understandable that students were unfamiliar with it. The second most commonly checked word was 'fiasco' which was also not found in the list, neither were the words 'terminal,' 'shambles,' and 'backlog' (See Figure 2).

In relation to the students' ability to find the correct meaning of a word, 17 students (27%) succeeded in choosing the most appropriate meaning of all 5 words they looked up. This means that 47 students (73%) were unsuccessful in choosing the appropriate meaning of one or more of the words they looked up. Only 3 students were unsuccessful at looking up more than 2 words.

There were 3 categories of look up problems with words:

1. The participant chose the wrong dictionary entry (53 cases)
2. The participant chose the correct entry

3. The participant found entries but was unable to decide (4 cases)

By far the largest category of errors found was category 1, in which the students chose the wrong entry. Some examples of category 1 errors can be found in Figure 3. Some of these errors were commented on by the students, and some were not, which shows that some students were aware that they may have chosen the wrong entry. Some of the post task questionnaire responses are given below:

- "Too many meanings and some meanings I don't know clearly."
- "I can't find in some dictionary and I don't know what 'shuffling gait' is."
- "Don't know how to choose the correct one."
- "How does the meaning relate to the context."
- "Dictionary had over 5 meanings and all of them are difficult for me to understand."

**Figure 3.** Category 1 errors (Wrong dictionary entry chosen)

Word	Context	Perceived meaning
<i>terminal</i>	'In the airport terminal...'	<i>In the final stage before death</i>
<i>descend</i>	'Things soon descended into chaos'	<i>To make a sudden attack on</i>
<i>shambles</i>	'It was all a shambles'	<i>To walk tiredly or slowly dragging feet in a tired lazy way</i>
<i>spite</i>	'In spite of ...'	<i>Feeling a need to see others suffer.'</i>

**Figure 4.** Category 2 errors (Correct entry chosen but misinterpreted the meaning)

Word	Context	Perceived meaning
<i>backlog</i>	'A backlog of luggage.'	<i>One word has 2 forms</i>
<i>descend</i>	'Descend into chaos'	<i>To go down.</i>

**Figure 5.** Category 3 errors (Entry found but unable to decide on correct meaning)

Word	Context	Perceived meaning
<i>handles</i>	'The airport handles...'	<i>To take action to deal with a situation</i> <i>The part of a door or window that you use to open it</i>
<i>descend</i>	'Descend into chaos.'	<i>To go down a mountain or slope</i> <i>To come nearer to the ground</i> <i>To become lower</i>

Some students, however, were unaware that they had chosen the incorrect word. One example was the word 'temporary' for which the student wrote the wrong meaning, interpreting it as 'current, now' but commented that "Dictionary is easy to use to describe this word".

### ***Post-reading task questionnaire***

The results of the post-reading questionnaire showed which dictionaries students used for the reading tasks, and how satisfied they were with these. Students stated that online dictionaries were the most helpful dictionaries they had consulted, which explains why many students reported in the pre-task questionnaire using this type of dictionary. Many students also felt that the hard-copy English-English dictionary was helpful, but this may have been because students believed that there is an expectation for them to use this type of dictionary. Only a small number of students reported being particularly dissatisfied with any one type of dictionary, but most students appeared to be very satisfied with both online dictionaries and electronic English-Chinese dictionaries.<sup>3</sup>

In response to how satisfied students were with their dictionaries, one student commented that he/she knew "English-English dictionaries are good but I don't know how to use it". Another student, however, commented that he/she was "very satisfied" with this type of dictionary. One student also remarked that a dictionary must "show a clear meaning, the usage, word family and examples". Two students stated that they would like dictionaries to give some indication of which words are more common and also give synonyms, and another pointed out that "you should guess meanings first and then use the dictionary".

The open-ended questions revealed that rather than guess the meaning from context, the overwhelming majority of students chose to look up the words that they were not able to understand. Two students did, however, state that they chose to look up only words that they felt were key and would hinder their comprehension had they not understood them.

<sup>3</sup> 90% of students stated they were either very or extremely satisfied with online dictionaries, and around 80% stated this for electronic English-Chinese dictionaries.

## **Conclusions**

RQ 1: What types of dictionaries do students use?

RQ 2: Do students use a paper monolingual dictionary both generally and when reading a text?

In relation to dictionary use, the results show, unsurprisingly, that students overwhelmingly use online dictionaries more than any other type of dictionary. These are presumably accessed online through a computer or mobile (smart) phone, although the research design did not allow for this to be ascertained. The results did also show that a sizeable number of students used a paper monolingual dictionary, although around half of students asked only used this type of dictionary once a month or less. Students also reported that online dictionaries were the most helpful in looking up words in the reading task.

RQ3: How successful are students in looking up the correct meaning of words they meet when reading a text?

In relation to the success of student look-ups, not all students succeeded in using a dictionary to look up the correct meaning for each word. The majority of these incorrectly chose the wrong dictionary entry, rather than being unable to decide or misinterpreting the meaning.

## **Implications and recommendations**

The first recommendation is that students need training on how to use dictionaries to avoid choosing the wrong dictionary meaning of words. Teachers could provide instruction to students about dictionary use, possibly going through examples of words in the context of a reading passage in class, using the dictionary together to remind students to look at all the entries for a word, not just take the first meaning. Correct and incorrect examples could be given so that students, especially weaker ones, gain an increased awareness of the dictionary consultation process.

A second recommendation is that students

could also be trained to use the paper monolingual dictionary more efficiently. Some language centres provide students with this type of dictionary, expecting them to use it while giving no thought as to whether they are able to. Some students come from language backgrounds which are not alphabetical, posing a difficulty in looking words up efficiently. Other students may not be familiar with the abbreviations used for certain terms, which can be found in a glossary at the beginning or end of the dictionary. In addition, students often report that they know a monolingual dictionary is useful, but they do not know why. Teachers themselves may not fully understand why.

Therefore, a final recommendation is that teachers should learn about monolingual dictionaries themselves and the arguments for and against their use, as there is differing opinion as to whether students should use this type of dictionary or not.

The findings of the research may be applicable to Chinese students in other university contexts, especially in Sino-British universities or other universities which teach through the medium of English. In addition, with the development of technology, including online dictionaries and faster smartphones, it may be that the students are using paper dictionaries less. Further research could investigate how successfully students use online dictionaries and how they compare to other more traditional types of dictionaries.

## References

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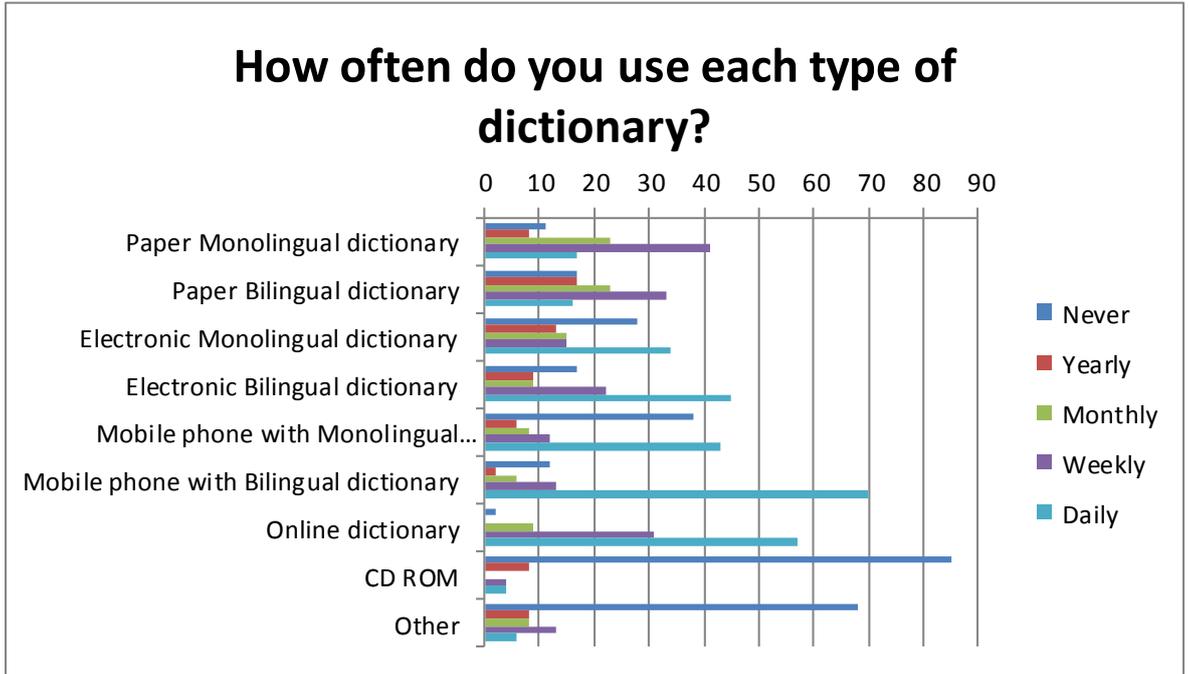
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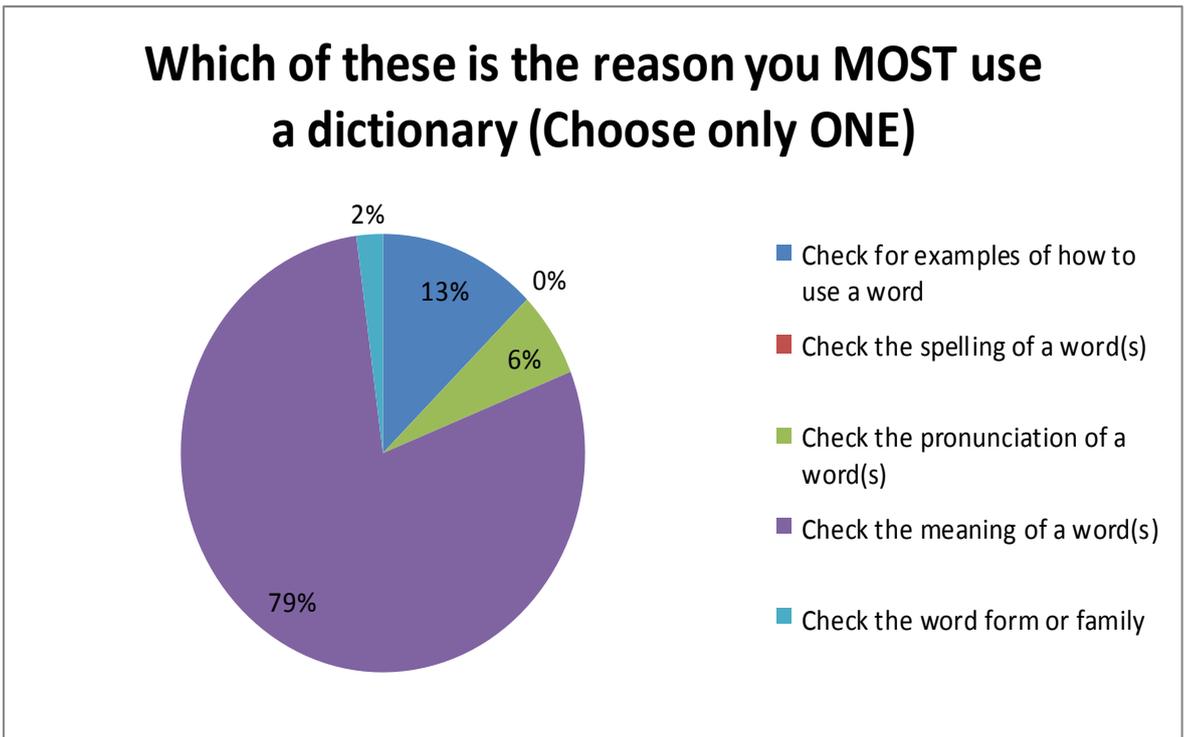


Appendices

Appendix 1

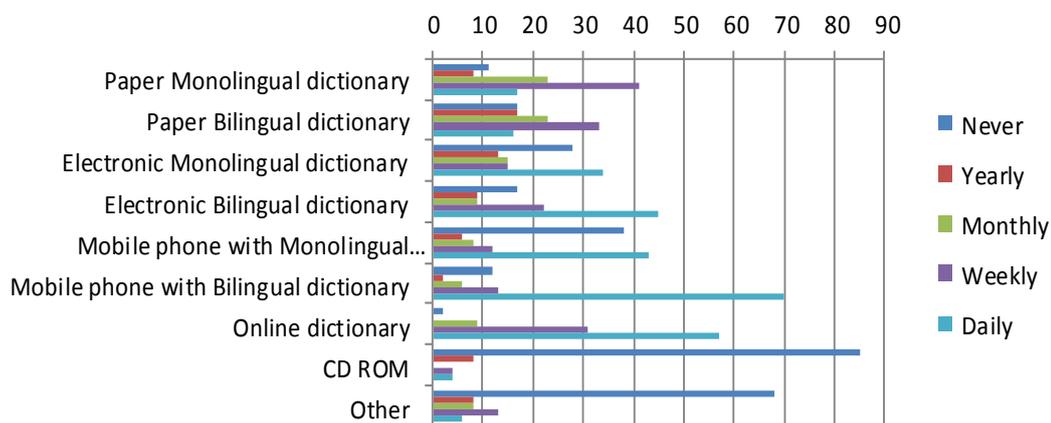


Appendix 2



Appendix 3

### How satisfied were you with the information provided in each type of dictionary?



Appendix 4

### Which dictionary did you think was the MOST helpful? (Choose only ONE)

