

# **The Use of Electronic Dictionary in the Language Classroom: The Views of Language Learners**

## **Abstract:**

E- Dictionaries have the potential to be a useful instrument in English Language classes, at the same time; it can be seen as a waste of time and a hindrance tool in the English Language classroom. This paper reports on students' use of e-dictionary in two of "Educational Readings in the English Language" course sections through in-depth focus group discussions with some of the students. The overarching question that this study explores is "What are the students' experiences in using e- dictionaries in Educational Readings in English classes at the Faculty of Social Sciences and Teacher Training students at A-Najah National University?" Findings of this exploratory study show that students had great and exciting experience in using the mobile dictionary in learning new vocabularies. Therefore they have positive attitudes and perceptions toward mobile dictionary.

**Key Words:** e-dictionaries, mobile dictionaries, paper dictionaries, English vocabulary, EFL

## **1. Introduction:**

### *1.1 Statement of the problem*

One of the most significant challenges that learners face during the process of foreign language learning is learning vocabulary. Vocabulary has been known as a central point in any language learning in which inadequate vocabulary knowledge of the learners led to problems in foreign language use (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011). The use of dictionaries is a great help in vocabulary learning, and nowadays the development of electronic dictionaries has added a new and appreciated resource for vocabulary learning (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011). Studies have found that e-dictionaries had a great help to students in learning new vocabulary, besides it is an interesting, fun, tool to use.

Since dictionaries have not been explored extensively in Palestine, research into the use of them caught the researcher attention and pressed her to explore students' experiences in applying e-dictionaries in learning new vocabularies in Educational Readings in the English Language. It will also help in filling the gap in the scarcity of research in this area and enrich the research in areas of pedagogy and technology integration into teaching.

### *1.2 Scope of the study*

This research is restricted to explore the students' experiences in two sections of "Educational Readings in English" course at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training at An- Najah

National University in using mobile dictionaries in learning new vocabularies in an English language course.

### *1.3 Research Objectives*

This inquiry aims at:

- 1- Casting off the light on students' observations and experience in using mobile dictionaries in learning vocabulary in Educational Reading course.
- 2- Exploring the students' attitudes toward mobile dictionaries in learning vocabularies.
- 3- Highlighting major difficulties and challenges in using mobile dictionaries.

### *1.4 Research Questions:*

The study attempts to investigate the Faculty of Education students' experiences at An- Najah National University in using mobile dictionaries; it is specifically designed to provide answers to the following questions:

- 1- What are students' in Educational readings in English courses perceptions in using e- dictionaries in EFL learning?
- 2- What is the students' experience in utilizing e- dictionaries in EFL learning?

### *1.5 Significance of the inquiry:*

The implication of this research stems from the scarcity of studies on the role of mobile dictionaries in learning English vocabularies. This work will inform educators and teachers the experience of using mobile dictionaries in learning new vocabularies and highlights the major subjects in using that innovative tool in English language learning.

### *1.6 Subjects of the study*

The participants of this study included the registered students in "Educational Reading in the English language" during fall semester Of 2016 -2017 at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training at An-Najah University. A sample of 25 students took part from both sections in focus group discussions.

## **2. Literature**

There is confirmation that learners who check dictionaries to find the meaning of words while they involve in reading and listening boost their learning vocabulary (Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Knight, 1994; Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016). It provides quick and direct admission to several layers of vocabulary knowledge. It can serve many purposes, especially in providing the definition of words. The existing literature on vocabulary learning strategies illustrates that language learners can find out new vocabulary on their own by using dictionaries. Moreover, the use of dictionaries of the voice of the learner facilitates vocabulary learning as easily as text understanding (Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus,

1996; Knight, 1994). Also, Neubach & Cohen, 1988 as cited in Kobayashi, 2006 reported that consulting a dictionary improves the retention of learning the terminology.

There has been a growing interest in the role of electronic dictionaries for learning foreign languages. Accordingly, there has been an increase in students' use of electronic dictionaries for EFL purposes (Dashtestani, 2013). Electronic dictionaries (EDs) have advanced rapidly in the last three decades (Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016). From the first human-readable electronic dictionary (ED) available for the public in the late 1980s, EDs have been obtained on CD-ROM, small hand-held calculator-type reference works (i.e. Pocket ED), and online (Nesi, 2009). Research shows, according to Rezaei & Davoudi, (2016) that EDs are in many respects valuable. Compared with the bulk of paper dictionaries and slow retrieve, the increasing popularity of EDs can be credited to better readability and their ease of use, which makes the consultation process less time-consuming (Stirling, 2003; Kobayashi, 2006 as cited in Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016). In addition to CD-ROM and handheld devices, researchers also began to show interest in online dictionaries, due to the rapid advance of the Internet, smartphones, and iPads, and other ways of obtaining information (Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016).

Students are clearly affected by the technology that has driven the world and got interested in the latest technological products. Electronic Dictionaries (EDs) are becoming widespread as new technological tools of vocabulary learning among L2 learners will be used more broadly by language learners. Since dictionaries have not been researched widely in Palestine, research into the use of them caught the researcher attention and urged her to explore students' experiences in using e-dictionaries in learning new vocabularies in Educational Readings in the English Language. It will also help in filling the gap in the scarcity of research in this area.

The use and benefits of dictionaries and e-dictionaries in learning new vocabularies has expanded rapidly in the past two decades (Dashtestani, 2013; Knight, 1994; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001; Hulstijn, 1993; Fan, 2000; Hua & Zarei, 2013; Davoudi, 2016; Stirling, 2003; Kobayashi, 2006; Li & Xu, 2015; Nesi, 2009). Hence, this segment highlighted some of the subjects that administered with this area and guided this exploratory work.

Dashtestani, 2013 conducted a comparison survey to compare between Iranian EFL students' and teachers' perspectives on the role of e-dictionaries. Participants of the study were 126 EFL students and 73 EFL teachers and were invited to reply to questionnaires. Among them, 81 students and 66 teachers participated in follow-up interviews. Both EFL faculty and students held moderately positive attitudes toward the role of electronic dictionaries for learning EFL. They also suggested that there are several obstacles and challenges, including lack of training on the use of electronic dictionaries, students' use of unsuitable versions of electronic dictionaries, lack of facilities to use electronic dictionaries in EFL

classrooms, and distraction from learning caused by using electronic dictionaries in the schoolroom. The analysis of data further revealed that the bulk of Iranian EFL students uses electronic dictionaries installed on their cell phone telephones. The pupils expressed a penchant for using electronic dictionaries over paper dictionaries.

Stirling, (2003) also described EFL teachers and students' reactions to pocket electronic dictionaries (PEDs), more or less significant features of these devices, and practical techniques and natural processes for using them to enhance, rather than restrict with the learning process. The attitudes of teachers, according to Stirling, 2003 varied between "Great to see students using dictionaries independently" to "I will not have them anywhere near my classroom." Moreover, some students looked up more than twenty words a lesson, while others merely used them at home to get extra information about Lexis studied in grade.

The aim of Fan's, (2000) study is to investigate the look-up behavior of bilingualized dictionaries of Hong Kong students. It centered on the frequency of usage of dictionary information and how useful such information is comprehended. Fan, (2000) also established, a comparison between students more proficient in English vocabulary and those less proficient in identifying the dictionary searching behavior which may enhance L2 vocabulary learning. The issues under study included more than 1000 recent admitted students to the seven tertiary institutions of Hong Kong. The instrument for data collection comprised a questionnaire and the Word Levels Test. This investigation found that the overwhelming majority of students use bilingualized dictionaries and they find them useful. At the same time, the findings of the study have revealed that most students make only limited use of bilingualized dictionaries

The findings revealed various thematic aspects such as the learner's preference to use monolingual dictionaries than bilingual English Malay dictionaries. This finding suggests that students seem to deliver a fuller perception of the strength of such monolingual dictionaries in finding the correct senses of the words with multiple senses through the process seeking the meaning of L2 words using L2 definitions. The survey confirms the parameter for the strength of the monolingual dictionary as pointed out and recommended by many other previous researchers such as Fan (2000), Baxter (1980) and Nation (2001). In this sense, the study affirms the findings of previous works, which argue for the effectiveness, and advantages of the monolingual dictionary use in learning English especially for students at higher degrees of instruction.

As L2 learners progressively depend on electronic reference materials, Kobayashi, 2006 thought that it has become important to investigate how such materials are applied and what impact they have on L2 learning. Electronic pocket dictionaries (EDs) have particularly become popular among Asian learners of English in the past decade. The survey compared the role of EDs with PDs among Japanese university

students. It also tested the relationships between students' ED use and their role in lexical processing strategies (LPS; consult, infer, or snub), their vocabulary learning, and their interpretation.

This study investigated these issues both quantitatively and qualitatively, through multiple investigative techniques. The findings showed that EDs had become common tools for Japanese scholars of English; the majority of pupils (72% of 279 students) owned an ED, and those who owned it tended to utilize it alone, although they too owned a paper Dictionary PD. The answers showed the complex nature of the effects of EDs. EDs look to increase the frequency of dictionary consultation by students, especially by low-proficiency students.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Introduction*

This segment gives an explanation of the method used in this study to achieve the intended objectives. In pursuit of these ends, the fields of the survey are delineated and hence is the allocation of sample size as easily as data collection instruments

#### *3.2 Study design and rationale:*

The work relies on utilizing the qualitative approach, which requires gathering information from focus group discussions with pupils who are shown in the class. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), qualitative data provide a detailed understanding of a problem or experience. While Marshall and Rossman, (2010) argued that qualitative research is carried in a natural setting with the author observing, questioning, and collecting data for analysis to construct a holistic understanding and agency of the berth. As the purpose of the written report to explore students' experiences in applying e-dictionaries, therefore the qualitative data in this study provide a fuller understanding of students' experiences regarding use e-dictionaries in EFL classes (Rallis and Rossman, 2012).

#### *3.3 Subjects of the study*

The participants of this work included the registered students in two sections in "Educational Reading in English Readings" during the fall semester of 2016 -2017 at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training at A-Najah National University. The first section consisted of 51 students who were in their fourth year majoring Methods of Teaching Lower Elementary grades and they are prepared to be teachers for the 1-4 grade level. The second section consisted of 59 students who were a freshman and majoring English Language Teaching Methodology, and they will be teaching English subject for 1-10 students' grade level. Students in both sections took the course as a required course in their majoring plan.

A sample of 25 students took part from both sections in focus group discussions. The groups consisted of five students in pair session, and each session lasted 1 hour.

The aim of the “Educational Reading in English Language” course as described at the university website is to “ [train] the teacher students on reading a number English text that deals with various educational topics, which help students in enriching the English vocabulary dictionary and aesthetic structure” (An- Najah National University, 2017).

#### *3.4 Procedure:*

Students at the beginning of the courses were asked to download dictionary applications on their phones as to use them during reading the articles that are specified for the course. The students got the option to choose the kind of dictionary that they like to use; students had a meeting after a time of using the application to discuss the kinds and names of dictionary applications that they were using. Concerns were gone through, and questions were answered at that meeting. Throughout the semester and as a commencing point, students read each article on their own, then the class instructor and students discussed the article, explained the meaning of new lexicons, and wrote down some questions related to the read the article. Students were encouraged to use mobile dictionaries and were afforded the time to look for the meaning of new words before had the treatment. Course instructor assured to draw out the meaning from the students and agreed upon with the proper and the closest meaning for each new word.

Students on some occasions were also encouraged to contemplate on the articles by writing a paragraph or two on their understanding, thoughts, and opinions of the items. Students were also invited to use mobile dictionaries in doing that composition. This such a process lasted for the whole semester and students had the focus group discussion just at the conclusion of the semester.

The following portion of the study will identify some of the findings that came up during focus group discussion.

### **4. Study Findings:**

The aims of this study are to highlight students’ experiences in using a mobile dictionary in learning new vocabularies. Moreover, it explores students' attitudes toward using mobile dictionaries in learning. This portion of the field will highlight some of the findings in relates to that purpose.

#### *4.1 Attitudes and perspectives*

Students in all focus group discussions showed positive attitudes and healthy perspective toward mobile dictionaries through stressing out the importance of using it in learning new vocabularies, pinpointing some of its benefits, and the rate of using it in all language aspects like reading, writing, and pronunciation.

Participants during the focus group discussions rated their learning experiences in using a mobile dictionary and gave it 8-9 points out of ten, it was described it as fun, exciting and would like to continue using in other classes and outside the classrooms as needed.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fun</li> <li>- Fun, because you cognize how to answer and participate not only gearing up as a listener. Now there is more engagement</li> <li>- We utilize technology. It is pleasant</li> <li>- Very positive feeling, it leaves me to test out fresh ways of teaching and depend on myself</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ممتعة</li> <li>- ممتعة ، لانه بتعرف في كيف تجاوبي وتشاركي مو بس تكوني مستعمعة صار عنا تفاعل اكثر</li> <li>- أها حلوه مشوقه</li> <li>- اها بنستخدم التكنولوجيا اكيد حلوه</li> <li>- شعور ايجابي سمحلي أجرب طريقة تدریس جديدة و أعتمد على نفسي أكثر</li> </ul> |
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In regards to its importance, students highlighted that mobile dictionary is very easygoing, simple to use, quick in finding the meaning, help in increasing students' participation and involvement. On the peak of that, it enhances the students' dependency and autonomy.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Helped us a great deal and saved our time. Not relying on people or big bucks- referring to book dictionaries – simply write a word that you are looking for and that is set.</li> <li>- Encouraging students to teach and learning</li> <li>- Increase students' participation</li> <li>- Increase students' engagements</li> <li>- Identify new technology</li> <li>- Dependency</li> <li>- Gives the feeling that you are more advanced.</li> <li>- The most significant thing that you do not call for a people's favor</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ساعدنا كثير وسهل علينا وقت كثير إنه ما نلجأ لأشخاص أو كتاب كبير نضيع وقت واحنا ندور عليه بكل بساطة بنقدر نكتبها</li> <li>- يشجع الطلاب على التعليم والتعلم</li> <li>- زيادة المشاركة</li> <li>- سرعة التفاعل</li> <li>- بتعرفهم على الكتر ونيات جديدة</li> <li>- استقلالية</li> <li>- بتحسي حالك مطورا عن غيرك يعني</li> <li>- أهم شي ما تتحملي جميله حدا</li> </ul> |
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The idea of students' autonomy in learning was emphasized during focus group discussions, and students pointed that they rely on themselves more in their learning and they do not wait for peoples' help and favors

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Pupil 1: We relied on ourselves more; It is not anymore now that ask for every word we do not recognize.</li> <li>- Student 2: (continuing the mates' first point) Also doesn't cause embarrassment, if you keep asking about each simple word you do not know</li> <li>- Students 3: instead of simply writing the meaning of the language that the teacher is giving or writing, Now you know the meaning by yourself</li> <li>- Not relying on teacher anymore, now if there is a word that you do not know, there is another thing that can help</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- إنه اعتمدنا على نفسنا أكثر مش كل كلمة بدنا إياها بدنا نسأل عنها خلص</li> <li>- (طالبه اخرى معقب على ملاحظه زميلتها) كمان ما بتسبب احراج بدك تسالي عن كلمة بسيطة الكل بصير يصحك عليكي</li> <li>- بدل ما الاستاذ يكتب المعاني واحنا بس ننسخ لاء إنت بدك تعرف المعنى بنفسك</li> <li>- اه مش بس عالمعلم انه اذا في كلمة ما عرفتها ما بتخافي في شي بساعدك بالبيت</li> </ul> |
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#### 4.2 Snapshots of students' experiences in using mobile dictionaries

Students portrayed ways of using mobile dictionaries in learning new vocabularies in "Educational Readings in English" course. Focus group discussions revealed that students used a mobile

dictionary for getting the meaning of new vocabulary, pronouncing those new words, spelling, and in writing.

For example, Students indicated that mobile dictionary is a very helpful tool in pronunciation

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| <p>Student 1: we use it whenever we need to pronounce a word and do not know it before.<br/>         Student2: Certainly, in reading, we use it frequently. When there are new words that we cannot read. Indeed, we use an electronic dictionary.<br/>         Student3: I know the meaning of the word from the class. But sometimes at home, I forget how it is pronounced, therefore I look again for it for its pronunciation</p> | <p>طالبة: يعني كل ما الواحد يحتاج لفظ كلمة وما بكنوش الواحد بعرفها فيضطر انو يستخدمها<br/>         طالب: اكيد في reading بنستخدمه مليح، في كلمات لمن تقرا وتكون جديده عيك فمن الطبيعي انه يكون فيها كلمات جديده قينستخدم القاموس الإلكتروني<br/>         طالب: انا بالبيت بعرف أترجم المعنى بس أحياناً ما بعرف لفظها للكلمه يعني موجود المعنى مترجم منك من المحاضره بس ناسي كيف لفظتي لهيك برد بعيد اللفظ</p> |
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Students pointed out also that mobile dictionaries helped them in writing tasks and assignments, especially when they had their ideas in Arabic, but could it not express them in the English Language.

The mobile dictionary was a helpful tool in finding the meaning of new words in the classroom and outside the classroom. It helped students getting the sense of new words that they are not familiar with which facilitated their discussion in the classroom. Students recorded several ways in using mobile dictionaries outside the classroom, for example:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- I use it often when facing words that are new and challenging while teaching my sisters.</li> <li>- Also, I use it in University General English courses</li> <li>- When I read an English novel to improve my English language</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- انا كتير بستخدمه مش بس بمساق القراءة انا عندي مثلا اخوات لما بدرسهم مرات في كلمات بتمر الا ما انسى معناها او تكون صعبة علي بستخدمه</li> <li>- كمان بمساقات انجليزيات الجامعة</li> <li>- مرات بجيب رواية بالانجليزي عشان تحسن حالي باللغة</li> <li>- فالكلمة إللي ما بعرفها يحطها بالمترجم</li> </ul> |
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Finding the right meaning of the text that students are reading is the greatest challenge that students faced in using mobile dictionaries. Bilingual dictionaries provide wide many meanings for each word and students had difficulty identifying the correct meaning for each word

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a difficulty for example; there are words that have more than one meaning. I read the sentence, look for its meaning and find out later on that what is have chosen is not what the writer aimed at.</li> <li>- Sometimes I had to write the whole sentence to get the targeted meaning.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- في صعوبة مثلا في كلمات الها اكثر من معنى، مثلا بقرأ الجملة، مثلا ببحث عن الكلمة اللي بعرفهاشن مثلا فبيعطيني معنى غير اللي معني فيه الكاتب</li> <li>- أحيانا بضطر اكتب كل الجملة مشان اعرف معنى الكلمة اللي بدي اياها</li> </ul> |
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In relating to names of dictionary applications that students used for that course, they recorded names ranged within Google Translate, Box Arabic- English, Golden Dictionary, Comprehensive Dictionary, Dictionary Arabic-English, offline English Dictionary. Students indicated that they did not



face any technology problem or Internet issue while using mobile dictionaries as they used the offline version in the classroom due to lack of the Internet connectivity.

## **5. Discussion and Concluding Remarks:**

The findings of this study showed that participants expressed positive attitudes and perceptions toward the use of the mobile dictionary in “Educational Readings in English” course and in learning new vocabularies. They are also eager to use it in other courses and outside the classroom when teaching and helping other siblings. These findings concur with other previous research on the perceptions, attitudes, beliefs in using dictionaries and mobile dictionaries in language learning (Rezaei & Davoudi, 2016; Dashtestani, 2013; Stirling, 2003).

Students also highlighted that they used the mobile dictionary mostly in pronunciation, spelling, writing, and most importantly in finding the meaning of new vocabulary. They had fun, and interesting experience in applying this such kind of technology in language learning. That such a nice experience echoes with other previous studies like Hulstijn, Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Knight, 1994; Kobayashi, 2006). These studies indicated that using both bilingual and monolingual have their unique strengths in developing vocabulary knowledge and students value that experience. These studies demonstrated general patterns of dictionary use for word meaning, L2 students also use dictionaries for other information such as pronunciation, spelling, and syntax.

Although students reflected on the process of using mobile as easy and straightforward, and they do not need training on using mobile dictionaries, further discussions on that topic revealed that they faced challenges in identifying the right meaning among several that mobile dictionaries provide. This point seems critical, and teachers should spend some time explaining the different kinds of mobile dictionaries and train students how to use it appropriately. Li & Xu, (2015) also suggested in his study to provide dictionary skills training due to incorrect choices students faced in his study. The existing literature on vocabulary learning strategies illustrates according to (Asgari & Mustapha, 2011) that language learners can learn new vocabulary on their own by using dictionaries. However, they need to be trained on how to use dictionaries appropriately.

Size and convenience as was pointed by Stirling, 2003 were considered significant advantages. The portability certainly encourages increased dictionary use and allows learners to use outside the classroom and doing other things. These points and advantages were also discussed among the study participants and encouraged them to use it whenever they need them to use it.

This current study was limited in the following ways. The first one was the small sample size of the participants; 25 of registered students in certain course at the Faculty of Educational Sciences and Teacher Training. More participants might have been generalisable. Another limitation was to this study

was confined to the descriptive data obtained from the students themselves. To conclude, further research is required to have comprehensive picture of utilizing mobile dictionaries in language learning classes regarding curriculum development, classroom management, and its effect on students' language acquisition and retention in Palestinian context.

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