University L2 Learners’ Voices and Experience in Making Use of Dictionary Apps in Mobile Assisted Language Learning (MALL)

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ABSTRACT

Language learners can now access language learning information anywhere and anytime with handheld mobile devices connected to unlimited online information. Searching the meaning of unknown language items encountered online may be the first step for language learning to take place. Making good use of e-dictionaries and dictionary apps is a key factor that affects learning efficiency. Using a survey questionnaire completed by more than 200 participants and examining both quantitative and qualitative data, this study investigated how Hong Kong university L2 learners make use of dictionary apps and probed into what dictionary functions they actually use and what functions they desire when they engage in MALL. Four categories of dictionary functions, including lexical information, extra resources, lexical tutors, and lexical tools, are used to describe all dictionary functions that students accessed or desired. The results show that dictionary apps have become essential tools for Hong Kong university students to learn an L2 as well as facilitate their academic studies; bilingual dictionaries with multiple functions and rich resources are meaning decoders that help students engage in learning both in their subject courses and English learning. Some discrepancies exist in learners’ actual use and desired use of dictionary functions, which deserve the further attention of both app developers and language teachers to improve learners’ efficiency of vocabulary learning. In addition, teachers play an important role in guiding students’ lexical learning. Based on the findings, a framework for understanding Hong Kong university students’ choice and use of dictionary apps is provided, based on which implications are offered and discussed.

KEYWORDS

Bilingual Dictionaries, Dictionary Apps, Dictionary Functions, MALL

INTRODUCTION

The prevalence of mobile technologies has enabled ubiquitous online reading and learning for L2 learners, especially in the area of incidental lexical learning (Kukulska-Hulme et al., 2015; Ma, 2016; Song & Fox, 2008; Wible, Liu, & Tsao, 2011). Research reveals that learners tend to use lexical tools, especially e-dictionaries or dictionary apps, more frequently than other learning tools or technologies.
such as YouTube, social networking sites, mobile apps or online language games (Ma, 2016; Ma, 2017; Levy & Steel, 2015; Steel & Levy, 2013). Given the importance of accessing the meaning of unknown vocabulary encountered in online reading, these meaning technologies have become indispensable tools for L2 learners to learn and interact with the vast amount of available online information (Hamel, 2012; Dang et al., 2013). A user-friendly online dictionary or dictionary app is key to decoding new information and helping learners understand messages encountered online. These apps are often equipped with multiple functions, including word searching, recording words, note taking, or even self-testing, but users’ use of these functions has rarely been reported.

Review of the literature shows that studies on e-dictionaries largely focus on measuring the effectiveness of dictionary use when compared to paper dictionaries (Dziemianko, 2010; Chen, 2010), examining some specific features such as look-up behaviours (Laufer & Hill, 2000; Liu, Fan, & Paas, 2014) and studying multimedia glosses embedded in the dictionary design (Chun & Plass, 1996; Yoshii, 2006; Yagnguas, 2009). The results of these studies identified good features of e-dictionaries and confirmed their positive educational value on L2 learning. However, most of these studies are experimental in nature and are under researchers’ manipulation. Very few have investigated learners’ perspectives on e-dictionary use. As Levy (2015) points out, it is important to hear learners’ voices as “learners are increasingly utilising their own powerful, personal technologies in their language learning independently outside of class without a teacher present” (p. 557).

This study starts with a review of the literature on dictionary use. Then it reports a survey involving more than 200 Chinese L2 learners from a university in Hong Kong, which probed deeply into their experience with and perspectives on the functions of dictionary apps, especially concerning those which they actually use and which they desire, as well as understanding patterns in the learners’ use of the dictionary apps in their daily routine – i.e. when, where, and how they make use of them. After discussing the results, some implications will be provided to inform dictionary app developers and language teachers about how to improve users’ lexical learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empirical Studies on E-Dictionaries

Empirical studies on e-dictionaries typically focus on measuring how effective users’ engagement with such tools is on lexical ability or reading comprehension. Researchers usually start with a predesigned e-dictionary and try to evaluate its effectiveness with intended users. A number of studies aim to establish the effectiveness and efficiency of e-dictionaries as compared with paper dictionaries. For example, Dziemianko (2010) compared the online and paper versions of the COBUILD dictionary by measuring both receptive and productive vocabulary retention. The results show that online dictionaries are more effective in helping students retain the meanings and collocations of vocabulary items. Chen (2010) compared the use patterns and perceptions of handheld electronic dictionaries with those of paper dictionaries by measuring comprehension, production, and vocabulary retention. No significant differences are found between the two types of dictionaries in comprehension and production of vocabulary items; each type is perceived to have certain disadvantages and advantages. However, the processing speed of using e-dictionaries is significantly faster.

Another popular theme is to investigate how some specific design features embedded in e-dictionaries facilitate student learning. The effectiveness of various multimedia glosses has been widely studied by researchers. This type of study, from the mid-1990s to the early 2000s, mostly investigated incidental learning embedded in online reading. Textual glosses were usually compared only with glosses accompanied by pictures or videos, or with textual glosses plus pictures or videos. Occasionally L1 glosses were compared with L2 glosses (cf. Yoshii, 2006). The results show that textual glosses plus visual aids (pictures or videos) are usually more effective than textual glosses only (cf. Akbulut, 2007; Chun & Plass, 1996; Yagnguas, 2009; Yoshii, 2006). When it comes to
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