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Studying Usage of EFL Dictionary at Graduate Level in South Punjab

Masroor Sibtain

Government Graduate College of Science, Multan.

Hafiz Muhammad Qasim

Government College University, Faisalabad.

Qurat-ul-Ain

MPhil Scholar, The Women University, Multan.

Abstract

This research aims to study the dictionary using habits among the learners of English as a second language in the South Punjab region of Pakistan, their reference skills, and look-up behaviours. Literate people usually keep and consult a dictionary for negotiating with meaning, and in the case of dealing with the lexis of a foreign language, dictionary usage assumes far greater importance. Dictionary using skills in the EFL context assume considerable significance in ELT classrooms where dictionary skills are emphasized as the bedrock of learning the English language with an optimal level of proficiency. Lexicographers take into view the factors such as lack of dictionary using skills, behavioural factors, L1 background, and desired goals for command of L2 as key variables in compiling dictionaries. It is questionnaire-based research that employed a mixed-method approach. The objectives were set to explore the effects of basic dictionary skills and suggesting better strategies to exploit the monolingual EFL dictionary to the maximal potential. The theoretical framework of this study was based on Tono (2001). Data was collected through a questionnaire having close-ended as well as open-ended questions. 240 learners of English, both male and female, at the graduate level in public as well as private universities and colleges of Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur divisions, were involved in the study as respondents. Data were analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively. Findings showed that L1 background, L2 proficiency level, students' behavioral factors, and untrained and inexperienced teachers were the cause of faulty dictionary use and lack of references of skills among EFL learners.

Keywords: Dictionary reference skills, look-up behaviour, EFL learners and L2 proficiency

Introduction

Dictionary has assumed greater significance with the publication and tremendous success of learner's dictionaries across the globe. Lexicographers today are more inclined toward the user's perspective to compile such dictionaries to cater to the specific needs of the prospective users. User's needs vary if the context shifts from ESL to EFL. The widespread notion of EFL lexicography pertains to dictionary-making for those users whose mother tongue is other than English. A desirable level of proficiency in the English language is not overemphasized in the world of today because the style under reference has virtually dominated a higher range of communicative activities in the world in general and in Pakistan in particular. Status of English in Pakistan beggars no detailed description when we consider the status of this language as official. Lexicography, art and craft, deals with producing dictionaries to the effect that they cater to the user's diverse linguistic needs. Hartmann and James (1998) consider dictionary making as a professional job and academic field of study dealing with dictionaries and other reference works like thesaurus and encyclopedias. Dictionary research has two primary considerations: dictionary typology and dictionary components. Lexicography is further divided into two broad areas: lexicographic practice (dictionary-making) and lexicographic theory (dictionary research). Landau (1984) considers it as an art as well as a craft for dictionary-making and thus distances lexicography from the notion in the past-dictionary making activity. Ilson (1985) believes that the notion of dictionaries in the past was restricted only to the storage of lexical information without taking into view the users' input. No significant attention was directed to the problem of dictionary use and as to how to include in the dictionaries user's friendliness. Lexicography as it stands today takes into research on dictionary use among the target users too which ultimately provides valuable insights on how to change the product into a more fruitful and convenient tool of learning a language. According to Hartmann (1994), the investigation into dictionary usage has become the most vibrant and promising activity in dictionary research which has effected an unprecedented betterment in a dictionary.

Gouws and Prinsloo (2005) believe that dictionaries after lexicographic research are not restricted just to providing linguistic information, but they are more than that linguistic instruments used by language learners both at home and educational institutions. They are an integral part not only of the library but also the homes where literate people live. Dictionary making as a specialized field of activity invites a lexicographer to consider aspects such as

dictionary typology, its layout or dictionary structural format, the inclusion of lexical items or lexical density, user-friendliness, and convenience in accessibility. Lexicographic research has a multidimensional perspective, i.e., micro-structures, macrostructures, mega-structures, meta-language, dictionary classification, semantic, comparisons, meaning, illustrations, and reference skills.

EFL Lexicography

EFL dictionary typologically belongs to the monolingual dictionary that gives preference to the users who learn English as a second language. What a learner expects from a dictionary comprises information on pronunciation, meanings, spelling, and grammatical knowledge.

A non-native speaker of English needs to be sensitized with all the above but also with the appropriateness of the lexical choices in a diverse context. In the context of second or foreign language learning, dictionary consultation is not a new idea at all. Dictionaries have been used for years to disambiguate confusion regarding difficult or unknown lexical items. In the recent past, there was a perceptible shift in attitude towards dictionary usage among the learners. Bejoint (1994) opined that dictionary users' reference skills are less examined when compared with the analysis of their needs. Now, learners or users of dictionaries are also given great importance and their attitude towards dictionary use.

Research Questions

The following questions have been framed to initiate the present study:

1. What dictionary using preferences are shown by EFL learners in South Punjab?
2. How far do weak reference skills account for failures in look-up on the part of the EFL learners?
3. How far are the design features of the dictionary accountable for EFL learners' failure in look-ups?

Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose behind carrying out this research is to explore how the EFL users exploit the monolingual dictionary, what information they have regarding dictionary types, how they access dictionary components (see table-2 for details), and what failures they reflect vis-à-vis dictionary usage.

Significance of the Study

This research focuses on EFL learners' reference skills which Cowie (1983) defined as the skills that the user is presumed to be possessing, or can be expected to acquire, in handling a dictionary (whether general-purpose or specialized) and making effective use of the information dictionary contains. This research assumes more considerable significance in absolute respect; namely, it initiates lexicographic research in general and research in specialized lexicography in the South Punjab region. The region, as such, is less advanced as per infrastructure and educational institutes, which indirectly reflects a far from the satisfactory state of learning of English. It would further enlighten us about the need for dictionary reference skills and, ultimately, of users' needs in this part of the world. Thus, the concept of Hartmann and James' (1998) user's education and training in dictionary skills would be highlighted here.

1.5 Delimitation of the Study

This study is delimited to EFL learners, both male, and female, at the graduate level in public colleges and universities of Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, and Bahawalpur. The study is further delimited to respondents' knowledge of dictionary typology, reference skills, and preferences. The study, as such, is delimited to developing a coherent view of the reference skill and look-ups strategies of the learners of English in South Punjab. It is delimited to both Pocket English Dictionary (PED) and the paper dictionary (PD) available in this part of the world.

Literature Review

Theoretical framework

The study follows Tono (1999), who favours questionnaire-based research as the most appropriate tool for seeking information from dictionary users. He administered a questionnaire as a data collection tool to assess the dictionary use among the EFL learners in Japan. He believes that there can be significant improvements in the quality of dictionaries by investigating the dictionary users' reference skills. His work upholds Bejoint's (1994) view that dictionaries have enjoyed the status of authority. Readers and dictionary users cannot question the quality and reliability of dictionaries. Users' reference skills directly impinge on their views about the deficiency of the dictionaries. Tono (2001), however, points out a shortcoming in employing a questionnaire-based survey due to learners' inability to have appropriate knowledge of reference skills and meta-lexicographic knowledge.

Analysis of user's skills has assumed central place and is thus a broader area in lexicographic research. Tono (2001) provides a different framework for needs and skills analysis, which is as follows:

- i. Analysis of target situation
- ii. Factors involved on the part of learner's
- iii. Specific contexts of dictionary usage

He also includes some other factors which affect dictionary use i) L2 proficiency ii) L1 background iii) individual differences iv) contexts of use v) types of dictionaries. He proposed three ways to overcome the challenges encountered while dictionary use as follows:

- i) How should students be made able to exploit the potential of dictionaries to the optimal level?
- ii) How should students be trained in using dictionaries successfully?
- iii) How can the layout or presentation of linguistic information in dictionaries be handled?

Good dictionary users understand the microstructures of dictionaries as compared to those less familiar with dictionary structures. Such users are quick at locating the desired lexical item in a dictionary without any wastage of time. They are also good thinkers as they do not rush towards dictionaries for every word. They analyze the required lexical information at a word level, syntactic features, and try to find means to know about the meaning. Good dictionary users thus always prove to be proficient in learning a second language as compared to those who are not good at dictionary use. This theoretical framework serves well in analyzing the data of this research.

Works already done

Barnhart (1962) is perhaps the most significant research work concerning the first survey on learners' needs, wants, and habits of using dictionaries. This research aimed to explore the importance of different types of information included in the famous American college dictionaries. Teachers were asked to evaluate six types of most valuable information contained in these dictionaries according to the importance given by freshman students. Hartmann (1987) considered this research as the most significant for lexicographers as it provided help for managing data and was beneficial for dictionary users. Quirk and Greenbaum (1973) carried out the first scholarly research at University College, London Britain, and tried to evaluate the users' behaviour, their suppositions, and prejudices toward dictionary use through direct observation of the dictionary users. Students pursuing different disciplines were selected for this study. The findings of this research were exciting and showed that not only less advanced or unsuccessful users prefer bilingual dictionaries, but developed and

successful users and university teachers also preferred bilingual dictionaries. Research also showed that beginners and intermediate students were not aware of the contents in dictionaries. The start of the 21st century marks the advent of the electronic dictionary on a broader scale. Hartmann & James (2000), Nesi (1999 & 2003) mark the beginning of the PEDs.

Pocket English dictionaries have seen a tremendous rise in their popularity in the first two decades of this century see (De Schryver: 2003, Lang & Lee: 2003, Stirling: 2003, Bower & McMillan: 2007, Chen: 2007 & Midlane: 2005). Dictionary research exhibits a larger volume of works with the paradigm shift from just dictionary-making to user's needs assessment. The present study is a step in the same direction, i.e., developing a holistic view of the learners of English in the South Punjab region to highlight the belief that dictionary compilation and criticism are complementary.

Research Methodology

Research methodology involves an organized, systematic, and scientific effort and guides a researcher to finding answers to the research problems. There is a considerable difference between research methodology and research methods. The present research employs a mixed- method approach and is empirical. It uses a questionnaire-based survey to gather information regarding the research questions framed for the study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) opine that the major purpose behind qualitative and quantitative research is to find out the truth, with optimal objectivity and consistency, and a sound method is highly essential to meet the said end.

Sampling

The study employs a stratified sampling technique. A homogenous sample of 240 students was selected as respondents keeping in view their educational level, age, and gender. The sample comprised of the respondents whose mother tongue was other than English. They consist of the students at the graduate level enrolled in the BS-4year program in the subject of English.

Population

The population of the study comprised two hundred students, both male and female. The population consisted only of learners of English enrolled in the BS-4year program at three public sector institutes (120 learners 40 each from Bahauddin Zakariya University, Emerson University & Govt.

Graduate College of Science Multan) and three private sector institutes (120 learners 40 each from ISP, NCBA&E and UCP Multan.

Tool of data collection

A questionnaire is preferred to gather data on respondents' choice of dictionary, reference skill strategies, and need analysis. The first section of the questionnaire covers the personal profile (see Table-1 for details), namely respondents' names, the medium of instruction at college, mother tongue, language proficiencies, etc. The second section deals with general information regarding dictionary components and structures (see table-2 for details). The third section, however, deals with respondents' dictionary using skills. All ethical considerations were fulfilled to keep the privacy of the respondents intact. The data gathered thus is analyzed through statistical means namely SPSS.

Data Analysis

Data collected through the questionnaire is analyzed, and results are drawn in this part. This part comprises three sections, each dealing with different aspects of the study.

This section of the questionnaire covers respondents' profiles: educational background, the medium of education in the past, the current medium of instruction, enrolment in discipline, and mother tongue:

1.	Medium of education till matriculation	English	Urdu	Urdu- English
		20%	38%	42%
2.	Medium of education in current studies	English	Urdu	Urdu- English
		28%	38%	34%

Figure 1 User's Medium of Instruction

Figure 1 displays the results of the past and present medium of instruction of the participants. The results show that the medium of instruction of participants was English (20%), Urdu (38%), and Mix (42%) in the past. Moreover, the medium of instruction is English (28%), Urdu (38%), and Mix (34%) in the present course. Moreover, in the present research, there were 59% male and 41 female participants.

Gender distribution	Male	Female
	34%	59%

Figure 2 Gender Distribution

Multan (study population area) is a multilingual society; the language of the participants was also varied. For instance, Figure 3 shows that 36% of the participants were Urdu speakers, 35% of the participants were Saraiki speakers, and 29% of the participants were Punjabi speakers in the present research.

Mother tongue of the participants	Urdu	Saraiki	Punjabi
	36%	35%	29%

Figure 3 Mother Tongue of the participants

Proficiency level of participants	Listening	Reading	Speaking	Writing
	42%	41%	6%	11%

Figure 4 Language Proficiencies

The researchers asked the proficiency level of the participants for the basic four skills of the English language. Figure 4 shows that 42% and 41% were proficient in listening and reading skills, respectively. And 6% and 11% of participants were proficient in Speaking and writing skills respectively.

Discussion

This section details the information about dictionary use, dictionary ownership (see Figure 5 for details), dictionary typology etc.

Students were asked about the use of a dictionary. Tono (2001) emphasizes that EFL learners' proficiency in a second language impinges on their dictionary consultation, it further affects their choice and selection of a certain kind of dictionary. Relatively less proficient students face more difficulties in understanding contextual meaning. Therefore, they rush towards dictionaries for every word.

1.	Use dictionary	Yes		No	
		94%		6%	
2.	Specify dictionary	Printed		Digital	
		33%		67%	
3.	Possession of electronic dictionary	Yes		No	
		74%		26%	
4.	Electronic dictionaries are easier to use	Yes		No	
		84%		16%	
5.	More helpful dictionary	Monolingual		Bilingual	
		36%		64%	
6.	Start of consulting dictionaries	Middle standard	Secondary	Intermediate	After intermediate
		13%	16%	45%	26%

Figure 5 Knowledge of Dictionary

The most probable reason behind excessive use of the dictionaries may be seen through i) if low proficiency L2 learners, ii) desire to select the most appropriate lexical item on the part of proficient learners. The first case describes unsuccessful learners who do not possess enough knowledge relevant to the words being looked up and further to use the words keeping in view aspects like contextual meanings and phrasal verbs. Hartmann (1983) also endorses the same view and declares that L2 learners use a dictionary for more common words considering these words more problematic and confusing. Whereas, L1 learners have no such interest in common words; they consult and keep dictionaries removing ambiguities regarding rarely used, less familiar and difficult words. Sometimes, they search it for alternative words or synonyms. 6% of students said that they do not use dictionaries. There are two possibilities which are as follows:

- a) Students' tendency to guess the meaning from the context.
- b) Students' carelessness while ignoring every difficulty related to word meaning.

Electronic dictionaries have solved the problem to a greater extent. A user today can find out correct pronunciation by just clicking on the volume option. It produces results in just a blink of an eye without wasting time. It is no doubt a tremendous advance in the field of lexicography. These dictionaries not only provide the speaking facility, but also provide their users with grammatical information, usage in diverse contexts, collocation, synonyms, and information related to a word. These dictionaries also remove ambiguity regarding grammatical issues and spelling checking. Printed dictionaries are marvellous and unmatched in some of their features too but their importance cannot be ruled out. During a look-up in a paper dictionary, the learner searches not only for a single lexeme but unintentionally goes through many other words. It is a good point associated with printed dictionaries. The ELT teachers and scholars also complain about the decline of hard/bind/paper dictionaries. We can predict that in the future, a digital dictionary will overwhelm the market. The same thing has happened in Japan and other countries where English has a specific role. The trend of printed dictionaries is going down day by day. The most distinguishing factor between printed and digital dictionaries is that digital dictionaries are more up-to-date. Data can be easily edited, added, and deleted at any time, which is difficult in the case of printed dictionaries.

When respondents were enquired about the convenience of using digital dictionaries, a fairly large number of respondents responded in favour of digital dictionaries as more convenient to use. To search one word from thousands of pages in paper dictionaries sometimes misleads the students. Such look-ups are reported to be very frustrating for dictionary users. Tono (2001 p.55) opines that "Along with behavioral factors, there are some psychological factors of the learners which affect their dictionary use. These factors are anxiety, risk-taking, introversion- extroversion, and self-esteem."

While selecting a dictionary whether monolingual and bilingual, a learner is confronted with a number of issues that impact the choice of dictionaries. Sometimes, ELT tutors make recommendations to their students to use either a monolingual or bilingual dictionary for no sound reason but personal likes. Teacher's own experiences and preferences impinge heavily on the learners' choice of a dictionary. If teachers are privy to lexicographic practice and are well trained in dictionary usage skills, they would suggest to EFL learners to consult only the monolingual

dictionaries. EFL learners are not reported to be fully satisfied with bilingual dictionaries. Such dictionaries may be helpful for decoding and to a lesser degree for encoding. Keeping in view both receptive and productive needs, the learners are advised to consult only the monolingual dictionaries. These dictionaries are undoubtedly the best source of guidance for foreign language learning among non-native speakers. Research shows that monolingual dictionaries are more useful, but students in this part of the world prefer bilingual dictionaries. In monolingual dictionaries, when students look up the meaning of problematic or difficult lexis, the users have to look up the difficult words in meaning explanation later to understand them too. It leads to a never-ending search for the words and relevant aspects if there is a problematic word in the definition. Therefore, bilingual dictionaries are preferred as less complicated while searching for meaning in the quickest possible manner.

Monolingual dictionaries are preferred by EFL learners. Such dictionaries invite an in-depth process of thinking for the retrieval of the information on the part of learners. Information obtained through such a process is admitted to be long-lasting. Relatively higher mental effort is required for using monolingual dictionaries. The study showed that only 36% of students preferred monolingual dictionaries to bilingual ones.

The findings showed that monolingual dictionaries, as well as bilingual (L1-L2) dictionaries, were useful tools for guiding language learners by looking up the relevant lexical or semantic information. However, the degree of usefulness was different in terms of their effect on foreign language vocabulary learning.

Tono (2001 p.101) also affirms that students start consulting dictionaries after the secondary level. To seek admission in colleges, they are required to pass the entry tests which ask about their knowledge of syntactic rules, collocation and other linguistic information. The majority of the students had English as the medium of education from the primary level, but only a few students consulted dictionaries at the middle standard. It points out the behaviour of both the students and teachers towards language learning and teaching respectively.

The items in section 3 were related to dictionary skills which include reference skills (see Figure 6 for details), look-ups behaviours, and reference skills. Tono (2001) also detailed the behavioural characteristics of good dictionary users as i) mastery over microstructure, ii)

ability to think mastery. Successful look-up on the part of learners is marked by less time consumption in the retrieval of linguistic information from both micro and macro structures.

In contrast with successful users, the poor users of dictionaries always make haste towards dictionaries without making any anticipation about the target word.

The desire for language proficiency is an essential factor in developing dictionary skills. Proficient users prefer monolingual dictionaries for this specific reason. Though all such factors are interrelated with reference to dictionary skills and successful dictionary usage, yet sometimes even successful users make better meaning guess about different words other than the dictionary information (see table-5 for details).

Most of the respondents said they use dictionaries. Then why did they not perform well? Why did they not possess reference skills and look-up behaviour? These questions allude to the pathetic situation of the learning and teaching process in our country. Most of the students were found to be not able to exploit the rich linguistic information contained in dictionaries. They usually consult their teachers in the face of any difficulty as teachers are considered as human dictionaries and authority on language. EFL Teachers must therefore be trained and well cognizant of new dictionary-making techniques. A large volume of lexicographic research shows that many teachers of a foreign language like English in the case of Pakistan lack the basic knowledge of how to use dictionaries in the best ways. They use their previous knowledge and uphold the tradition of using and recommending bilingual dictionaries.

Less than half of respondents said they never got instructions about dictionary use. There was a contrast between students' answers and their performances. If students were instructed about dictionary use then why could they not perform satisfactorily in the last test of the questionnaire? Students had no basic dictionary skills. There could be many reasons why students did not perform well in the translation section? May be lack of practice was the reason.

One of the leading causes of students' failure is our weak education system. Untrained or less trained teachers are recruited in the education system. The learners do not possess a sufficient level of proficiency in dictionary use. For example, information about abbreviations contained in the Front Matter is reported to be ignored by the respondents. To use this part effectively, students should be encouraged about the importance of this part namely the front matter.

The attitude toward dictionary use needs an overall transformation. In the absence of sufficient knowledge of dictionary skills, learners of English cannot hope to develop the desired level of proficiency. Both successful and unsuccessful dictionary users are reported to take the same time in finding headwords or lemma. The difference in time however occurs in micro listings. Thus students should be adequately trained in dictionary use to develop optimal proficiency. Do the skills help them in determining which part has to be accessed first? Which information should they skip and get later on? All these skills can make dictionary use an easier task.

Students who faced difficulty while dictionary consultation sometimes ascribed it possibly to the fact that they consulted dictionary primarily for learning to mean and admitted to having often ignored pronunciation, illustrative usages, idioms and phrasal verbs. They further reported that sometimes the information provided in dictionaries is quite challenging to the EFL learners. Behavioural factors of EFL learners thus found affecting their usage of dictionaries. A proficient EFL learner however is familiar not only with microstructure but also the macro and mega structures. He keeps in mind that just knowing word meaning does not suffice as contextual element shapes lexical choices. Such a dictionary user does not rely on any ordinary dictionary. To gauge what EFL learners expected from the dictionary of their choice, the questionnaire contained four open-ended questions and the respondents were given a free hand to provide their input and share their precious views. These open-ended questions were enlightening and were analyzed qualitatively.

When the respondents were asked about the dictionaries they mostly used, their preferences can be arranged as per the following order *Oxford Advanced learner's Dictionary* and *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Both hardbound dictionaries) and among digital dictionaries, they were in favour of *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Collins English Dictionary*.

The number of respondents in favour of bilingual dictionaries was higher as compared to monolingual dictionaries. The most probable cause behind this factor is the traditional ways of language teaching relying most frequently on the grammar-translation methods that involve the role of L1 in L2 learning. A fewer number of respondents used *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, *Merriam Webster Dictionary*, or any other.

The third section of the questionnaire also included an activity a decoding test. Students were required to display their dictionary using skills while translation from English–Urdu. As most respondents

had English as their medium at the secondary level, a remarkable contrast was observed among the respondents regarding translation from English to Urdu and exploiting a dictionary. The use of a dictionary for such a practical task exposed them vulnerable in reference skills. Most of the students were not able to translate even a single line. Only 8 or 9 students were able to translate 90% part of the paragraph. 15-20 students translated only half of the given passage.

From the result that most respondents could not fill the questionnaire, it may be assumed that they might become over conscious or nervous while they were being observed or it might be their lack of confidence about their dictionary usage skills. In this research, some students questioned whether they would receive this questionnaire marked? It further points to the fact that control research does not provide actual results and many lexicographers discourage questionnaire-based research on this ground. The researchers in future may also include other protocols to overcome such concerns. What could be the actual cause behind students' failure to decode the text in the English process? The answer lies in the fact that L2 learning involves diverse skills from linguistic to reference. Dictionary skills among the respondents are weak and disorganized. The same thing is reflected in this research. This test exposed the inability of the students to consult a dictionary for a routine task in the ELT classroom in this part of the world. Students' present level of English showed not only their insufficient knowledge of the English language but also their sloppy attitude towards dictionary and dictionary typology. A right kind of dictionary aided by a study course in dictionary reference skills would bring about a remarkable change in the linguistic proficiency of the EFL learners.

Future Research Potentials

The study concludes that dictionary using skills are very important for EFL learners. Teachers, as well as teaching resources, must focus on such skills in the ELT classrooms. The use of electronic dictionaries calls for separate studies to predict the futuristic needs of dictionary users in this part of the world. The study provided diverse information regarding users' profiles, needs of dictionary designs, receptive as well as productive needs, insights on the meaning and its organization in microstructure and cultural barriers of the learners in the South Punjab region.

Conclusion

This research provides an overview of EFL learners' dictionary using skills (see Table 6 for details). Dictionary especially in the context of massive digitalization has assumed a far greater position

among academics not only as of the most dependable linguistic inventory and lexical database but also as an essential language learning tool for a foreign language learner. The findings of the study highlighted various issues involved in the present state of learning and teaching English in the South Punjab region. Despite much academic potential, learners are found in dire need of dictionary skills which so far have been seen absent as part of academic activity at any level in this part of the world. The plight of EFL learner's calls for the introduction of lexicography and at least short term seminars or courses to reinvigorate the learners of English and further develop such linguistic proficiencies as may help them excel in diverse communicative tasks in practical life. Without dictionary related research like look-up behaviours, dictionary reference skills (Figure 6), it is impossible to make dictionaries more reliable and users friendly, it seems a distant dream to see a significant betterment in EFL classrooms. The study also pointed out that L1 influence hampers learners' proficiency of English much and monolingual dictionaries should only be recommended by the ELT classroom managers and teachers.

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