

# ***SVETIMŲJŲ KALBŲ STUDIJOS/ STUDIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES***

## **Changing Skills of Dictionary Use**

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**Abstract.** The article aims to investigate the potential of dictionaries and ESP (English for Specific Purposes) students' preferences, ranging from the use of traditional to electronic tools of information.

Studying academic and professional language involves extensive search for terminology and complex information in order to efficiently comprehend specialized texts as well as carry out related vocabulary tasks. The repository of reference sources is enormous, and it has been increasing with the development of electronic tools. Literature on dictionary types and use reveals benefits and drawbacks of different types of dictionaries (bilingual, monolingual, bilingualized, both printed and electronic). According to the data of the studies by researchers investigating dictionary use, few bilingual dictionaries preferred by learners when carrying out reading and writing assignments get close in diversity and relevance to monolingual target language dictionaries. Furthermore, as English constantly renews itself to integrate new ideas and new developments, and electronic media are updated on regular basis, students are inclined to refer to up-to-date online sources, requiring different search skills in comparison to traditional ones.

This paper is based on the author's experience of teaching English for specific purposes as well as the analysis of a survey, the findings of which demonstrate the students' use of reference sources, the problems they encounter, and the importance of their active engagement.

**Key words:** *skills; monolingual; bilingual; target language; reference; online search.*

### **Introduction**

Dictionary is a significant source containing not only words of a language with their meanings, but also information on any field of knowledge. The diversity of dictionaries and other reference sources is enormous and the student has to possess certain expertise to make a good choice of them. Students of ESP read specialized authentic texts in the target language and engage in tasks contributing to their comprehension of issues relevant to the subject. This involves frequent consulting of such reference materials as specialized encyclopaedias and other reference guides. With the development of electronic media, the exclusiveness of traditional printed dictionaries has been lost as the online sources have been gaining great popularity among students. The potential of technologies to provide instant information may seem especially rewarding to the student; however, the overwhelming immensity of results provided in response to a query when searching for definitions may also trigger frustration. Thus, students need certain skills to examine and assess the accessed data in order to select relevant information from the stored data.

**Research aim:** to analyze the potential of dictionaries and ESP students' preferences, ranging from the use of traditional to electronic tools of information search.

### **Research objectives:**

1. to survey researchers' information on dictionary types and use;
2. to investigate students' habits and preferences of dictionary use.

### **Research methods:**

- 1) analysis of studies on dictionary types and use;
- 2) survey, including a questionnaire, and analysis of the findings.

### **Dictionaries and the ESP learner or using dictionaries efficiently**

Dictionaries are among the most readily available, widely used, and cheapest learning resources (Wright 1998). They are a primary source of lexical information for most learners and fulfill a variety of functions: decoding for comprehension (while reading or listening), encoding for production (in writing, speaking or translating), and also for intentional learning of new vocabulary (Scholfield 1987).

Dictionary use has only relatively recently become a topic of research interest. Scholfield's (2002) research suggests that dictionaries are used about equally in the process of reading or writing, and sometimes when just studying/ learning. Spelling and meaning are the information most commonly looked up, with much valuable information in entries (e.g. about grammar and collocation) being underexploited.

Scholfield (2002) claims that in the reading process, dictionary use competes with various kinds of guessing, or just ignoring unknown words that come up. There is strong evidence that expert readers make good choices about when to use each of these, do not use the dictionary exclusively, and often do so after making attempts at guessing (Nesi 1999), whereas learners tend to overuse dictionaries for comprehension purposes in particular, by looking up words unnecessarily (Ranalli 2003).

According to Scholfield (2002), in writing, the dictionary may be called upon for a wide range of types of information besides word meaning. Often a writer retrieves a word for what they want to express, but needs to check some aspect other than its meaning (e.g. irregular verb tense form, or what a typical object might be), or choose between two words they have retrieved. Dictionary use either in reading or writing may lead on to learning, and may additionally be used along with more decontextualised learning strategies.

However, dictionary use is complex. Without proper skills the dictionary can be as much of a hindrance as help (Berwick & Horsfall 1996). In order to be able to read this special book and use it effectively, users need certain skills – defined by Hartmann and James in their Dictionary of Lexicography (2002) as “*the abilities required to find the information being sought*” – and specific training.

The most basic skill for using a dictionary is alphabetical sequencing (Oxford University Press 2006). It needs to be taught and practised. According to Roberts (1997), efficient dictionary use implies obtaining the expected results, on the one hand, and accomplishing this in the shortest period of time possible. One has to be aware of the various categories of information that can be found in dictionaries, the overall ordering of these categories, dictionary types, and the specific categories of information found in different dictionary types.

### **A short overview of major types of dictionaries**

Learners' dictionaries can be classified into two major types – those that only use the L2 (monolingual dictionaries like the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary, the COBUILD Dictionary, the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English and the Cambridge Learner's Dictionary), and those that make use of the L1 (bilingual or bilingualised dictionaries) (Nation 2003).

A number of studies have been conducted on the relative importance of monolingual, bilingual or bilingualised dictionaries for L2 learners. As different information suggests, each type of dictionary has its own benefits and drawbacks. This overview does not cover all the advantages and disadvantages of every type of dictionaries, it focuses on the main insights provided by the studies conducted.

To start with, bilingual dictionaries are praised by some EFL teachers and reviled by others. The most important advantage for bilingual dictionaries is that they are easier to use than monolingual reference works. Moreover, they provide instant answers. For these reasons, as Raudaskoski (2002) states, bilingual dictionaries are the popular choice among students, especially at the beginner and intermediate levels.

Nevertheless, bilingual dictionaries are mostly reviled by EFL teachers because they help students maintain a “translation barrier”. Raudaskoski (2002) draws our attention to the fact that by concentrating on isolated headwords and their equivalents, these dictionaries keep up the students' habit of relating every new word they learn to their L1.

Scholfield (2002) gives another argument saying that learners need to get into the habit of “*thinking in the target language*”: they will not be efficient comprehenders and users of English if they always operate via an extra step of translating into their first language, which the use of bilingual dictionaries is likely to encourage.

Martin (1998) also points out that such dictionaries only perpetuate learners' dependence on the native language:

*“bilingual dictionaries are more of a hindrance – at least to intermediate or advanced students – than a help to second-language learners”.*

Monolingual dictionaries also have their positive aspects and their criticism. They are favored by those language teachers who feel that monolinguals contain more information about the foreign language (L2) than bilinguals (Raudaskoski 2002). More importantly, monolinguals present their L2 information in L2. With their definitions and examples, they make every dictionary search a useful experience in more ways than the one perhaps originally intended; besides pinpointing the meaning of a headword, the user finds out about its collocations, learns how to paraphrase it, and receives several good examples of how to use it in a sentence. In addition, the user learns to think in L2 instead of relating every new word he or she comes across to his or her own mother tongue (L1).

Aiming at proficiency in English, some authors (Scholfield 2002; Sánchez 2005) have no doubt that monolingual dictionaries should be preferred. Scholfield (2002) claims that graduation to a good monolingual dictionary is something learners should be encouraged to aim at as soon as their proficiency allows it.

Teachers must recognize that definitions provided in English-English dictionaries can vary greatly in degree of difficulty. Often, as Lindsay Taylor (2004) mentions, the definitions provided in English-English dictionaries are abstract and difficult to interpret.

The most serious drawback of monolingual dictionaries of a foreign language is that the user is often unable to retrieve the word he needs (Bogaards 2005; Winkler 2001). Although more and more techniques and tools are being created to overcome this problem, in many cases learners will need a bilingual access mode in order to get at the words they need (Bogaards 2005).

The bilingualized dictionary can be seen as an all-in-one solution to the needs of a learner's dictionary user (Winkler 2001). It is, as Raudaskoski (2002) expresses vividly, “*the supposedly happy marriage of the two above-mentioned paradigms*”. Being often based on an existing monolingual learner's dictionary, it contains the L2 definitions and examples of the monolingual dictionary and the easy-to-use L1 equivalents of the bilingual dictionary. The emphasis in the entries is on the L2 material, and for this reason the

equivalents are often called “keys”, as they are rather aids for understanding than stand-alone translations of the headword. The user is supposed to turn to the definitions and examples first, and if the meaning of the headword still remains somewhat unclear, the key is there to provide clarification and reassurance (Reif 1987). If the bilingualized dictionary is equipped with an index of all the keys used, the user also has handles by which to access the L2 headwords when in need of an L1-L2 translation.

Bilingualized dictionaries, however, do not escape criticism. The concept of the key is slightly problematic, as the key should be a competent L1 translation, but simultaneously draws as little attention to itself as possible. The user is likely to skip definitions and examples altogether and only pick up the instant translation proffered by the key (Nakamoto 1995). Furthermore, the index can be misleading to an inexperienced user. Since it contains only the keys used in the entries, it is by no means a representative sample of the L1, merely displaying the entries of the original monolingual dictionary. At worst, the index could be used as a misleading and incomplete L1-L2 dictionary (Raudaskoski 2002).

Taking into account the benefits and drawbacks of each type of these dictionaries, teachers should recommend dictionaries which are level-appropriate, and which would facilitate students' language learning. In doing so, they will not only be helping their students acquire language in a practical way, but will also be providing them with a sense of independence in the learning process (Taylor 2004).

### Use of electronic data

The rapid development of electronic tools brought about new perspective in applying reference sources. The Internet has gained popularity, and libraries are no longer considered exclusive repositories of stored information. Therefore, changing reference works demand changing skills needed in consulting them. Winkler (2001) infers that access and retrieval are no longer determined by the internal, traditionally alphabetic, organization of the dictionary or the structure of the input. According to the author, demands on the user of such a dictionary are also greater as emphasis is less on following a predetermined path through the dictionary structure and more on navigating relationships across and within entries via a choice of links. Lee (2000) reinforces the idea by stating that World Wide Web makes it possible for students to tackle a huge amount of information, and as the way information is presented is not linear, users develop thinking skills and choose what to explore.

Koren (1997) also points out that the electronic dictionary requires different skills or habits than those required by the printed dictionary. These skills resemble “computer skills”, which usually do not take long to master. Among them are, for example, the habit of seeing information pop up after clicking some buttons without really having to search, contrary to the “dictionary skill”, which demands lots of skimming and scanning as well as reading, especially in the monolingual and “bilingualized” dictionaries.

The main advantage of online search for learners is self-evident – it provides instant access to stored information.

However, instant access to the sources does not necessarily mean accessing information the user has been looking for instantly (Rothenberg 1997). Here, several factors should be taken into account: the internet is still in the development, improvement stage. Too often too much of what passes for information is simply advertising for information. Rothenberg develops an ironic idea that “*you throw a query to the wind and you may get thousands of answers*” (1997: p596). The enormity of the capacity of stored information is overwhelming, but, unfortunately, web pages are not arranged in order of importance, thus it may be time consuming selecting the relevant answers to your query. The author also emphasizes the randomness of online search (p596):

*“the acts of linking and networking and randomly jumping from here to there become as exciting or rewarding as actually finding anything of intellectual value”.*

However, according to Scholfield (2002), there is a trend that information is presented according to the frequency of use. Even good reference sources, as for example, Cambridge online dictionary, present information according to the frequency of use, and it so happens that specific terms are not covered.

Sharpe (1995) supports the notion that the main attraction of electronic dictionaries is the speed with which the users retrieve information. But he expresses his fear that “*it may not necessarily aid the memory’s retention for language learning purposes*”. Koren (1997) believes that the reason for this probably lies in the fact that while looking up a word in the printed dictionary, the reader has to think about the word for a longer time since it takes longer to find the word than when working with electronic dictionary. In addition, the printed dictionary enables the user to see the word family, therefore exposing him or her to more varieties and uses of the same word. Therefore, printed dictionaries help to learn words, whereas most of the electronic dictionaries help to find words (Koren 1997).

Students need not just navigational skills, but ability to trust their knowledge, logic, judgment when choosing sources and determining their credibility (Rothenberg 1997: p597). The notion that credibility of the sources needs to be evaluated is confirmed by Frank Austermühl (2001: p72):

*“When judging the validity and usefulness of a website you should not blindly follow the recommendations of any editor, it’s better to do your own content evaluation”.*

Computers have become indispensable in the contemporary world. Thus, as Sharpe (1995) puts it,

*“the advantage of the electronic dictionary and the familiarity of today’s young people with electronic devices will eventually relegate the printed notion of ‘dictionary’ to a secondary sense”.*

Koren (1997) agrees that in the world of convenience it does seem likely that printed dictionaries will be obsolete once their electronic counterparts do their jobs more efficiently.

### Analysis of findings

In order to find out students’ habits and preferences in dictionary use, a survey was carried out. The sample comprised 88 students of ESP, who are exclusively first year

students of the Faculty of Informatics at Kaunas University of Technology. The findings of the survey relate to both offline and online dictionaries (type of dictionary, frequency of use, reasons for looking up words, difficulties encountered when using dictionaries, etc.). The questions were mostly multiple choice ones, the number of choices ranging from 3 to 8, with the exception of 2 where students had to supply their own answers, thus providing qualitative data.

First, we gave students several general questions about dictionaries they own, reasons for buying and intentions to purchase one in the future. The overall majority – 80 respondents – own a bilingual dictionary and only 27 of them pointed out owning an English monolingual. As for specialized, encyclopedias, thesaurus type, they were owned only by 10, 6 and 7 students respectively. Dictionaries were mostly bought by relatives, and only a very small number of respondents pointed out that they were going to buy one in the future.

**Table 1.** Which dictionary do you use most frequently?

	No. of respondents	
	Printed version	Electronic version
Bilingual: English/ mother language	65	69
Monolingual: English-English	7	55
Specialised (e.g. of IT)	3	10
Thesaurus	2	6
General encyclopedia	4	8

The question required to rank different types of online and offline dictionaries according to frequency of use. There is a correlation between owning and using dictionaries. The distribution of the respondents' answers presented in the Table 1 reveals that most frequently used dictionaries both offline and online are bilingual ones, which was pointed out by 65 and 69 respondents, respectively. As for the monolinguals, there is a distinct gap in the application of them when comparing both versions: printed and electronic. Only 7 respondents ticked printed monolinguals as the most frequently used ones, while the number of respondents ranking online monolinguals according to frequency, increased to 55. Here it should be noted that on-line monolinguals favoured by the ESP students, the respondents of this particular survey, when carrying out vocabulary tasks are the following: Cambridge Advanced Learner's dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, and Meriam – Webster. Easy-to-understand definitions, comprehensiveness, not to mention the user friendly, uncluttered interface are the characteristics adding to their popularity.

This result might be explained by a quotation from Shira Koren's (1997) article:

*“electronic dictionary provides information after clicking some buttons without really having to search, contrary to “dictionary skill”, which demands lots of skimming and scanning as well as reading, esp. in the monolingual printed dictionaries”.*

As for the 3 other reference types, specialized, encyclopedias and thesaurus, they were used least frequently by respondents. Comparing the 2 versions of these types, electronic dictionary was consulted slightly more frequently. Respondents were asked to give their opinions on the advantages of printed

dictionaries as well as on the advantages of electronic ones. The results show that the majority of students identify the portability of the printed dictionary as the only advantage, putting it as being able to have it at hand, while 23 respondents did not point out any advantages. Still, it can be noted that 3 students consider printed dictionaries as containing more information than e-dictionaries, 5 students provided an opinion that the search in a printed dictionary is more time-consuming, but the word stays in memory longer. This opinion is supported in the studies of the researchers Koren (1997), Sharpe (1995, p50), who stated that printed dictionaries help to learn words, whereas most of the electronic ones help to find words, and the fact that retention of words is likely to be better with a printed dictionary. The sample comprised exclusively computer science students. Thus, the respondents pointed out more features of the user friendliness of e-dictionaries, the most frequently mentioned being quick search (88 respondents), easy to use (71), a great variety of dictionaries on the Internet (53), and most of them being free of charge (45). 15 respondents pointed out the significance of the possibility to download updates of e-dictionaries.

**Table 2.** How often do you consult your English dictionaries?

	No. of respondents
Every day	11
Three/ four times a week	45
Once a week	26
Less often	6
Hardly ever	0

The Table 2 shows the breakdown of responses according to the frequency of dictionary use. 45 respondents, i.e. more than 50%, reported on consulting dictionaries 3 or 4 times a week, which is an important result. Dictionary consultation is a major component in ESP, and it has been observed that industrious students spend a substantial amount of time and effort consulting these sources of information, since reading of specialized texts requires not just consulting, but frequent cross-checking as well.

For the question on reasons for looking up words, students were offered several options which were ranked in terms of priority. The overall majority (82) of students looked up for meaning, which may be explained by the fact that ESP students read authentic texts designed for native speakers. The distribution of other options is as follows: students look up dictionaries for spelling (30), grammar (19), usage (17), phrasal verbs (14), derivatives, compounds (10), pronunciation (8), idioms (6), other: synonyms, definitions (4), and just 2 respondents looked up for collocations. The results of the responses to the questionnaire are reflected in Scholfield's (2002) research, where it is noted that spelling and meaning is information most commonly looked up, with much valuable information in entries such as grammar and collocations, being underexploited.

The questionnaire explored (Table 3) the problems students experienced when looking up words, the first mentioned being “definition was not clear” (51 respondents). The breakdown of responses revealed an inconsistency in students' responses: while a list of choices was provided, more than half of the respondents noted encountering difficulties, however, only one of them pointed out the necessity of cross-referencing.

**Table 3.** What kind of problems do you often encounter when looking up words in an English-English dictionary?

	No. of respondents
Word is not there	16
Information I need is not given	25
Definition is not clear	51
Entry is too long	21
Examples are not helpful	15
Word-combination is not given	27
Cross-references are necessary	1
Other: sometimes it is very difficult to understand what meaning to choose (not clear from the text)	2

The difficulties faced (Table 4) were attributed to unclear layout of the dictionary by 27 respondents, while 24 and 19, respectively, considered these problems being related to other reasons, such as their lack of familiarity with the dictionary and their lack of dictionary skills. However, there was no overall majority in favour of any of the choices. An open-ended option was provided, which was filled by several respondents, one of whom noted that there was too little information in the dictionary, and another encountered difficulties due to the differences between British and American English.

**Table 4.** Reasons for difficulties

	No. of respondents
Lack of familiarity with the dictionary	24
Lack of dictionary skills	19
Unclear layout of the dictionary	27
Too little information given in a dictionary, difference between British and American English	2

The following question was asked: “*When you find a word you want, how often do you look for connections with other words?*” to the response of which several options were offered. “Sometimes” was chosen by the majority of the respondents, (79%), “Always” – by 12% of the respondents, “Never” – by 9% of the respondents. These results confirm the notion that collocations are still underexploited by students.

The following description reflects results to the questions related to instruction on dictionary use. As has already been mentioned, according to researchers, without proper skills, the dictionary can be as much of a hindrance as help. Efficient dictionary use implies obtaining expected results on the one hand and accomplishing this in the shortest period of time possible (Roberts 1997). Students fail to exploit the immense amount of information provided in reference works because they lack dictionary skills (Winkler 2001). In this line, the intention was to find out the background of our students as dictionary users, their familiarity with reference tools/dictionaries and the type of instruction they had received prior to university studies. The results are as follows: 52% of the respondents had training in printed dictionary, while only 41% – had some training in electronic dictionary use. 30% of the respondents stated they would benefit from training in dictionary use, while 26% did not share the opinion. The majority (44%) did not know whether they would benefit or not from training of the kind. These results indicate the respondents’ lack of awareness of the advantages of proper dictionary consultation skills, on the one hand, and their

possible overconfidence in their dictionary skills, on the other. The latter can be explained by students’ reliance on electronic dictionaries. The results of the responses to the question discussed above have a correlation with the last question relating to their opinion about whether they consider themselves efficient dictionary users. Despite the fact that only half of the respondents (52%) have had training in using printed dictionaries, and even fewer of them (42%) have had some instruction in electronic dictionary use, the overall majority of the respondents believe themselves to be efficient dictionary users. The choice “I don’t know” shows a similar split of 16% and 22%, respectively.

## Conclusions

The aim of the paper was to analyze the repository of dictionaries constantly employed by students of ESP and to survey their preferences in the changing language/ vocabulary learning environment, comprising both traditional and electronic tools of information search. An overview of literature on dictionary types and use reveals the significance of the dictionary as a source of information, suggesting some benefits and drawbacks of different types of dictionaries (bilingual, monolingual, bilingualized, both printed and electronic) and presenting some insights provided by the studies of researchers investigating dictionary use, some of the most important of which are:

- 1) The use of monolingual target language dictionaries is emphasized, since they contribute to the user’s learning to comprehend and think in the target language.
- 2) Due to easy and quick search, accessibility of large amounts of data, and interactivity, computer-based dictionaries are gaining immense popularity among users.

Taking into account the results of the survey carried out among students, several major suggestions can be presented. First, to the majority of respondents, electronic dictionaries have more advantages over the printed ones. Second, despite the students’ proficiency level, the most frequently consulted dictionaries are bilingual ones (both printed and electronic). Third, the majority of respondents consider themselves efficient dictionary users, although only half of them (52%) have had training in using printed dictionaries, and even fewer (42%) of them have had some instruction on electronic dictionary use.

With regard to the development and improvement of electronic sources and their growing popularity among users, further research could be carried out to find out students’ skills and ability to assess the contents of online reference materials for validity, credibility, and usefulness after they have had instruction on electronic dictionary use, focusing on particular on-line dictionaries, e.g. Meriam-Webster, Cambridge Advanced Learner’s dictionary, and Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, and comparing them in terms of their usefulness and frequency of use.

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### Besikeičiantys žodynų naudojimo įgūdžiai

Santrauka

Šio straipsnio tikslas – aptarti žodynų potencialą ir studentų prioritetus renkantis tradicinės ir elektroninės informacijos paieškos priemones. Terminijos ir sudėtingos specializuotos informacijos paieška – neatskiriama akademinės ir profesinės užsienio kalbos studijų dalis siekiant suprasti specializuotus tekstus ir atlikti užduotis. Informacinių žinyrų resursai yra milžiniški. Jų skaičius auga kuriant elektroninius žodynus. Kalbai nuolat atsinaujinant ir prisitaikant prie naujų idėjų ir mokslo atradimų, elektroniniai žodynai vis papildomi nauja informacija. Straipsnyje apibendrinama literatūra apie įvairių žodynų tipus ir jų panaudojimą. Žodynų tyrėjų studijose pateikiami duomenys atskleidžia įvairių žodynų (dvikalbių, vienkalių, dvikalbių-vienkalių; tiek elektroninių, tiek spausdintų) privalumus ir trūkumus. Tyrėjai akcentuoja, kad yra mažai dvikalbių žodynų, taip mėgstamų besimokančiųjų, kurie įvairove ir tinkamumu prilygtų vienkaliams žodynams. Straipsnyje remiamasi autorių darbo su studentais patirtimi ir anketos rezultatų analize, kuri atspindi studentų aktyvaus darbo svarbą, įgūdžius naudotis informacijos šaltiniais ir spręsti problemas, su kuriomis jie susiduria.

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