Utilizing Electronic Dictionaries: Voice from Vietnamese EFL Learners

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Abstract

Vocabulary is a crucial part of effective communication. This aspect is closely related to dictionaries, the most popular type of which is electronic dictionaries (EDs). Different studies have taken a strong interest in exploring EDs and their role in language learning, but few have been done in the Vietnamese context. This study is going to examine Vietnamese English as a Foreign Language Learners' perceptions and practices of EDs, from which suggestions are made for their effective use. The research took place at a university in Vietnam, with the participation of 12 English majors. The study used a semi-structured interview to collect qualitative data with the utilization of thematic analysis. The results found that Vietnamese EFL learners use monolingual and bilingual electronic dictionaries very often, both inside and outside the classroom. The purposes for their use are also varied, two primary ones of which are checking meaning and practicing pronunciation. Moreover, it was found that they have a positive attitude towards EDs with different beneficial elements. They also addressed a few problems using EDs and made some recommendations for better use.

Keywords: Electronic dictionaries; EDs; Vietnamese EFL learners; practices, perceptions

Introduction

It is important for EFL learners to master vocabulary when it comes to learning a foreign language since this aspect is said to be a foundation for other elements such as grammar, spelling, meaning, and pronunciation (Nugraha et al., 2019). Indeed, it is a fundamental part of communication (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Schmitt, 2000, as cited in Trinh, Nguyen, & Tran, 2022). However, learning vocabulary is considered challenging among foreign language learners (Barham, 2017). To make this learning process easier, a dictionary is the top priority. A dictionary is a tool for learning and developing new vocabulary (Alhaisoni, 2016; Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013). This tool is increasingly common among language learners (Mohamad et al., 2017; Rashid et al., 2015). Obviously, it is an indispensable part of learning (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Chaima & Nouredine, 2022).

There are different views on the type of dictionaries that are used in a foreign language classroom (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013). With advancements in technology, dictionaries for learners have increased in number of types (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Rashid et al., 2015), one of which is the electronic dictionary (Le & Dao, 2019). Electronic dictionaries (EDs) have attracted increasing attention for their roles in the foreign language learning process (Barham,

2017; Dashtestani, 2013). This mode of a dictionary is regarded as a handy instrument for learning English (Barham, 2017) and plays an essential role in the language learning process (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Metruk, 2017).

Learners have turned to electronic dictionaries from paper ones (Wei & Chang, 2022) because they are more beneficial (Tono, 2000). Trinh, Tran, Vo, and Huynh (2021) stated that EDs support learning a foreign language, making this process go more smoothly and effectively. Zheng and Wang (2016) found these dictionaries boost students' independence in learning and contain a huge amount of knowledge that learners can explore. The authors also affirm an ED would be utilized for both in-class activities and out-of-class practices. Therefore, it is believed that EDs are used widely all over the world (Mohamad et al., 2017; Zheng & Wang, 2016), especially in Southern and Eastern Asia (Zheng & Wang, 2016). This popularity, indeed, is thanks to the global expansion of smartphones (El-Sawy, 2019). In general, it is obvious that EDs are favored by both learners and teachers (Ayed, 2020).

Even though EDs play a vital part in foreign language learning in general and vocabulary mastering in particular (Metruk, 2017; Zamkova et al., 2023), learners still are not successful in making use of this type of dictionary (Ronald & Ozawa, 2008) and face different challenges (Dashtestani, 2013). Moreover, its effectiveness is also questioned due to the belief that it is a time-wasting practice and a hindering instrument in the classroom (Barham, 2017). What is more, learners may find it difficult to choose the right ED for their own use (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020). Another difficulty is that language learners cannot identify the suitable meaning for the context where they are looking it up (Barham, 2017; El-Sawy, 2019). Even learners may be distracted by ED devices for a different purpose rather than learning vocabulary (Dashtestani, 2013; Rashid et al., 2015). Ultimately, the challenge may come from objective factors like facilities intended for learning (Dashtestani, 2013; Rashid et al., 2015). This includes the lack of internet connection (Mohamad et al., 2017; Nugraha et al., 2019). All these mentioned problems, according to Dashtestani (2013), are partly attributable to learners' lack of training from their instructors.

Overall, different scholars and researchers have stressed the importance of EDs in language learning, from their indispensability in learning to their accompanying challenges. However, there has been little research on Vietnamese learners concerning insight into their practices and perceptions of EDs. In order to explore deeply the learning tool, this paper is going to find the answer to how Vietnamese EFL learners use EDs to serve their language learning, their beliefs towards EDs, and their suggestions for better use of EDs.

Literature Review

Dictionary and electronic dictionary

Ambarwati and Mandasari (2020) suggested that there are different types of dictionaries. The classifications of dictionaries can relate to the number of languages in the dictionaries and the forms in which they are presented. As for language numbers in a dictionary, Awaliyah (2022) and Charpentier Jiménez (2023) stated that monolingual and bilingual dictionaries are the most widely used, even though foreign language learners may show a preference for a bilingual

(Alhaisoni, 2016). When it comes to modes of presentation, a dictionary can be in printed versions or at electronic availability (Alhaisoni, 2016), in that EDs are more popular (Alhaisoni, 2016; Charpentier Jiménez, 2023; Rashid et al., 2015) thanks to fast searching (Mohamad et al., 2017). One example of this type is Cambridge Dictionary (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020), which is available at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary. Some other terms can be used to refer to EDs, which are digital dictionaries (Töpel, 2014) or online dictionaries (Trinh et al., 2021).

Different definitions for electronic dictionaries can be found. They are defined as information sources that are readable digitally (Hamilton, 2012, as cited in Awaliyah, 2022). What this means is that it can be accessible through the internet or via a mobile application (Awaliyah, 2022). Another definition for EDs is that they are interactive elements for searching for word meanings, which are non-existent in paper dictionaries (Lew, 2010, as cited in Rashid et al., 2015). Nesi (2000, as cited in Töpel, 2014), Hilary and Warwick (2000), and Ayed (2020) defined EDs are any materials for reference that are stored in digital forms and provide information about word meaning, spelling, and use. For this definition, any translation tools are counted as EDs. One typical example is Google Translate (Nugraha et al., 2019; Wei & Chang, 2022).

There are three common types of EDs: hand-held e-dictionary, dictionary on CD-ROM, and dictionary on the internet (Rashid et al., 2015; Töpel, 2014). These are available on the internet or in mobile applications (Mohamad et al., 2017). Whatever way to define electronic dictionaries, they are all a perfect platform where non-textual media, namely videos, sounds, and animations, are stored (Lew, 2012).

The use of electronic dictionaries

The use of EDs by EFL learners has taken place both in the classroom and outside the classroom (El-Sawy, 2019; Zheng & Wang, 2016). This use is more favorable than printed dictionaries through computers or mobile devices (Loucky, 2010; Trinh et al., 2021). Generally, learners utilize different types of EDs in their language learning (Ayed, 2020; El-Sawy, 2019; Zamkova et al., 2023). In terms of language numbers in a dictionary, Alhaisoni (2016), Zamkova et al. (2023), and Wei and Chang (2022) found that learners prefer bilingual EDs to monolingual EDs, while Hakim, Aryati and Kurniawan (2020) and Metruk (2017) indicated that learners mostly use monolingual EDs for their learning, especially for pronunciation learning. Some popular and reliable monolingual EDs which were proposed by Hilary and Warwick (2000) are Oxford Learner's Dictionary, Cambridge Dictionary, and Macmillan Dictionary. Likewise, Google Translate is considered the most popular tool for bilingual translation (Alhaisoni, 2016; Hilary & Warwick, 2000; Wei & Chang, 2022). More recently, Wei and Chang (2022) introduced the top five most frequently used EDs at a Chinese college, which are "Google Translate, Yahoo Dictionary, Cambridge Online Dictionary, Online Word Reference Dictionary, and Wiktionary" (p. 41).

EDs can be used for different purposes and in a variety of situations. The primary purpose of using EDs is for vocabulary learning (Alhaisoni, 2016; Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Ayed, 2020; Barham, 2017; Chaima & Nouredine, 2022; El-Sawy, 2019;

Mohamad et al., 2017; Nugraha et al., 2019; Trinh et al., 2021). This is an obvious purpose when EDs are intended to provide learners with a huge amount of information (Zamkova et al., 2023; Zheng & Wang, 2016), and EDs can offer almost all semantic features like collocations, idioms, antonyms, and synonyms (Hilary & Warwick, 2000; Vakaliuk et al., 2021). For this use, learners would like to check word meanings (Alhaisoni, 2016; Barham, 2017; Hilary & Warwick, 2000; Trinh et al., 2021), look for word family (Zamkova et al., 2023), examine word spelling (Alhaisoni, 2016; Barham, 2017), and find illustrations for correct word use (Zamkova et al., 2023). Another popular situation for the utilization of EDs is pronunciation practice (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Barham, 2017; Hakim et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2021; Zamkova et al., 2023). These two major purposes can contribute to other skills in language learning, such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. More specially, Ayed (2020) stated that EDs can be used in listening and reading activities to boost vocabulary learning. This was supported by Zamkova et al. (2023) when they found that EDs help with reading learning. Other two skills which are supported by EDs are speaking, which has been proven effective by Hakim et al. (2020), and writing, which is believed to be enhancing (Awaliyah, 2022; Barham, 2017). Even more importantly, vocabulary learning from EDs can be supportive of translation practice (Zamkova et al., 2023). Overall, EDs play an essential role in developing learners' vocabulary and pronunciation accuracy (Metruk, 2017) and in bettering other language skills.

A preference for electronic dictionaries

Alhaisoni (2016), Dashtestani (2013), Töpel (2014), and Zamkova et al. (2023) agreed that EFL learners prefer using EDs to paper dictionaries. This is because EDs are more advantageous (Tono, 2000), even though both types do support vocabulary learning (Loucky, 2010). Amirian and Heshmatifar (2013) indicated that an ED is a better and more attractive learning tool partly thanks to highly interactive displays. Zamkova et al. (2023) and Zheng and Wang (2016) have another explanation for this preference, which is that EDs contain more information than a paper dictionary. Therefore, its capacity shows effectiveness in vocabulary learning (Trinh et al., 2021). Finally, learners experience faster search with an ED (Mohamad et al., 2017; Töpel, 2014), and promote learners' fast retention and production of vocabulary (Chen, 2010).

Learners' perceptions towards electronic dictionaries

Positive attitudes

Previous studies have shown that EFL learners have positive attitudes toward EDs and have made frequent use of them in their learning (Barham, 2017; El-Sawy, 2019; Hakim et al., 2020; Rashid et al., 2015; Töpel, 2014; Zamkova et al., 2023). Besides learners, EFL teachers (Dashtestani, 2013; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020) also hold an optimistic view of EDs. Barham (2017) suggested that EDs bring learners great experiences, including enjoyment and fun. Indeed, Hojatpanah and Dashtestani (2020) said that EDs provide learners with different benefits and advantages.

The first good point of EDs is convenience (Barham, 2017; Hakim et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2021; Zamkova et al., 2023). They said that this mode of dictionary can be used anywhere and anytime. This is because they are portable (Awaliyah, 2022; Mohamad et al., 2017; Zamkova et al., 2023), flexible (Mohamad et al., 2017), and time-saving (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani,

2020; Trinh et al., 2021).

Another reason for using EDs is their availability to users. EDs are varied (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020), so learners have different choices. Also, they are frequently updated (Zamkova et al., 2023), and this is really meaningful (Hakim et al., 2020), which helps learners to acquire the latest information. What's more, EDs are accessible to everyone from different parts of the world (Nugraha et al., 2019), with instant access (Hilary & Warwick, 2000). The availability of EDs can be attributed to their free accessibility on the Internet (Nugraha et al., 2019), which makes them economical to EFL learners (Trinh et al., 2021) because they do not need to pay (much) for their use.

The third advantage of EDs lies in the opinion that they are user-friendly (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Nugraha et al., 2019). This is partly due to the fact that the information on EDs is arranged flexibly (Tono, 2000) and interactive (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013), which creates a motivating feeling for learners (Dashtestani, 2013; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020).

The fourth positive view about EDs is named usefulness (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Barham, 2017; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020). EDs store a large database with extra information about each lexical item (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Zamkova et al., 2023; Zheng & Wang, 2016), so they provide learners with unique features. One of these characteristics is the availability of sounds from which learners can practice pronunciation (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Barham, 2017; Trinh et al., 2021). More interestingly, some EDs can be connected to other applications (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013), so learners can combine different resources for their learning. This opens the possibility of checking word origin and learning from guidelines for word use (Trinh et al., 2021). Therefore, EDs are absolutely a handy tool that can enhance vocabulary learning and vocabulary retention (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013).

The last beneficial aspect is effectiveness (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020). Trinh et al. (2021) affirmed that EDs improve learners' understanding and increase their ability to absorb new words. Dashtestani (2013) and Zheng and Wang (2016) also praised their effectiveness by proving that they demonstrate learners' autonomy enhancement or independence in learning. Moreover, EDs are really fast, especially in translating activities (Nugraha et al., 2019), e.g., Google Translate, and in the search for meaning and pronunciation (El-Sawy, 2019).

Discouraging elements to EDs

Although EDs have brought different benefits to EFL learners in their skill acquisition in general and vocabulary and pronunciation in particular, they also leave various difficulties or problems.

The first challenge is the learners' lack of training in ED utilization (Dashtestani, 2013). This leads to different difficulties among learners. For example, Barham (2017) and El-Sawy (2019) suggested that learners find it hard to identify the right meanings when they look up new words. Students, in fact, lack the knowledge and capacity to use them (Rashid et al., 2015). Another example is when learners are unaware that there are diverse types of EDs, so they do not take advantage of them (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020) and may choose an irrelevant EDs for

their learning (Dashtestani, 2013). Furthermore, learners pay little attention to pronunciation, examples, and collocations, which are useful due to their unawareness (Alhaisoni, 2016). Overall, the lack of training means learners will not make full use of the potential features of EDs (Ronald & Ozawa, 2008).

The second downside of EDs lies in learners' being distracted (Dashtestani, 2013; Rashid et al., 2015). This can be explained by the fact that EDs are used on the internet and mobile devices, so learners would not actually use theirs for the right purposes. Another, the sound of the devices used can be disturbing (Zheng & Wang, 2016). Moreover, EDs keep learners away from developing critical thinking, reducing their guessing skills (Zheng & Wang, 2016). This is understandable, for the use of EDs is so convenient and fast.

The last challenge comes from external factors. Lack of facilities or inaccessibility to the internet can be a problem in using EDs (Dashtestani, 2013; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2017). According to El-Sawy (2019) and Nugraha et al. (2019), EDs pose the need for a stable internet connection. Therefore, if this is not met, learners cannot make use of EDs in their learning. Another, there are restrictive school rules (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020), where learners are not allowed to use mobile devices in their classrooms. Moreover, some EDs are not reliable or accurate enough, especially some bilingual EDs (Mohamad et al., 2017). Some other EDs do not contain sufficient examples and definitions (Mohamad et al., 2017), so it is not meaningful to users. In addition, some EDs are partly or wholly inaccessible (Rashid et al., 2015), in which learners have to pay for their use.

A suggestion for better use

Hojatpanah and Dashtestani (2020) believe that teachers play the most crucial part in helping their students with the appropriate and effective utilization of EDs. There are some things teachers can do for students.

The most important thing is training learners to take advantage of EDs (Alhaisoni, 2016; Barham, 2017; Dashtestani, 2013; El-Sawy, 2019; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Loucky, 2010). Some examples are explaining different types of EDs to learners (Barham, 2017), suggesting ED types for students (Mohamad et al., 2017), training students how to choose the right one (Dashtestani, 2013; Wei & Chang, 2022), clarifying learners' purposes (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020) and training them in reference skills (Wei & Chang, 2022). These techniques in the classroom can raise students' awareness of EDs (Alhaisoni, 2016; Dashtestani, 2013) and encourage them to use EDs (Barham, 2017; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2017).

Another essential thing is putting together appropriate activities for students' practice. One typical teaching activity is conducting tasks requiring learners to look up words via EDs in the classroom (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013). Alternatively, teachers encourage learners to put words into context and find relationships between meanings in dictionaries and those in real life (Loucky, 2010).

Besides, teachers need to improve themselves in the context of technological advancement, aspiring for new teaching methods (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013) so that they can be self-prepared with knowledge of EDs to support students (Rashid et al., 2015).

Research questions

To fulfill the purposes of the study, the author addresses three research questions.

1. What are Vietnamese EFL learners' practices to electronic dictionaries as a learning tool?

2. What are Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions towards electronic dictionaries?

3. What can be done for better utilization of EDs?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The author adopted a convenience sampling method in this study, which took place at the Faculty of Foreign Languages at a university in Vietnam. The students participating in the study are being trained for a bachelor's degree in English Language Studies for a four-year period. More specifically, 12 English majors whose first language is Vietnamese took part in the study. All of them have been studying English for at least 10 years and have been using EDs (including English-English, English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English dictionaries) for over 7 years. There are 6 male students and 6 female students. Among those, there are 3 freshmen, 4 sophomores, 3 juniors and 2 seniors. To ensure anonymity, the authors refer to each person as a pseudonym.

Design of the Study

This research is a case study at a Vietnamese university. The study employed a qualitative method in which a semi-structured interview is an instrument for collecting data. The questions used for the interview focus on learners' practices and perceptions towards EDs. The questions were designed based on the literature review of ED use and belief, including the frequency of use, the ED types, the situations for ED utilization, the benefits EDs offer learners, the difficulties or challenges they have using EDs, and what suggestions are made for better use of EDs.

Data Collection & Analysis

The author sent an email to English majors at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, and 12 students agreed to take part in the interview. Before the one-on-one interview, each participant was informed of the purposes of the study and of the fact that their responses would serve the research only. The interviews were conducted through Zoom, a platform for online meetings. The author asked for recording permission from participants so that the data would be stored carefully. After 12 interviews, each of which lasted approximately 25 minutes, the author transcribed the scripts on Microsoft Word, entered themes and codes in Excel, and started analyzing. A thematic analysis was employed to come up with the practices, perceptions, and suggestions from responses among participants. All the recorded data were accessed only by the author on his personal laptop and were only released to a third party with permission from the participants.

Results/findings

What are Vietnamese EFL learners' practices to electronic dictionaries as a learning tool?

The Frequency

All participants stated that they used EDs almost every day to serve their learning. They would turn to their EDs if they came up with a new word both inside and outside the classroom.

> Huy: […] I use my EDs all the time. I mean, whenever I don't understand an English word, I look it up in my dictionary on my mobile.

> Loc: […] I go to school three times a week, and I use my EDs to check new words in my lesson. Even when I am at home or somewhere else, I use EDs to look for the meanings of the words at any time.

The ED Types

Almost all students used EDs both on the internet and on their mobile applications. Indeed, 11 out of 12 students installed from one to three dictionary applications on their mobile devices, i.e., laptops and mobile phones, and at the same time went online for website-based dictionaries.

> Thao: […] There is one dictionary application on my mobile, which is TFLAT. I use this to look up both Vietnamese meanings of English words and English equivalents of Vietnamese words or phrases […] I frequently check new words on the internet.

> Linh: […] I have three EDs on my phone. I also installed two of these three on my laptop.

Three-quarters of the participants used both monolingual and bilingual EDs in their learning, while the other quarter preferred monolingual EDs. The former group gave an explanation that bilingual EDs helped them relate to the mother tongue better, and monolingual EDs helped them get more time being exposed to the English language, while the latter reasoned that monolingual EDs enhanced their ability to use the target language.

> Quoc: […] I prefer using both types of EDs: monolingual and bilingual. I use a monolingual so that I can make the best of my time to experience English. A bilingual, however, helps me link English and Vietnamese together more effectively.

> Cuong: […] A monolingual, or an English-English dictionary, creates a better chance for me to think and process English all the time.

The Motivation for a Certain ED

All the participants have the tendency to use one or two EDs during their learning time. There are two primary reasons for their choice and loyalty. One comes from the popularity of the EDs they choose. The other is the reliability of the EDs they use habitually. The four most popular EDs are Cambridge Dictionary (web-based, monolingual with a "translate" feature) available at https://dictionary.cambridge.org/, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries (web-based, monolingual, and bilingual: English-English, German-English) found at https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/, TFLAT (mobile application, bilingual: Vietnamese and English) and Google Translate (multilingual translation tools, both web-based version and mobile application).

> Diep: […] I use TFLAT and Cambridge Dictionary because I see that all my friends and many other English learners are using it […] The dictionary I am using provides correct information which I can trust.

> Son: […] Google Translate and Oxford Dictionary are the two I use almost every day. I remember a friend of mine recommended these two to me, and I also realized that many people were using them, so I started to use them […] These dictionaries become my only resort when it comes to learning vocabulary, for they offer accurate translations and stable accessibility.

The Purpose for ED Use

There are different situations and purposes for learners' utilization of EDs.

All participants used EDs to check the meanings of the words they did not know about, which is an obvious purpose. This includes the search for appropriate translations of English and Vietnamese.

> Quoc: […] Most of the time, I use EDs for looking up the Vietnamese equivalents for English words.

> Cuong: […] When I want to translate English into Vietnamese and vice versa, EDs are always my best choice.

Another popular situation for turning to EDs is looking up the pronunciation. 5 students would look for the phonemic transcriptions of the words, and the other 7 students would love to use the "reading the word" feature on EDs. They believe this function helps them pronounce more correctly and sound more naturally.

> Trang: […] If I am not sure about the pronunciation of a certain word, I use a monolingual ED like Cambridge to look it up and use the reading button on EDs to listen to the sounds and practice reading along.

> Linh: […] When I am stuck with a certain sound, EDs would help me in a matter of seconds. Through this, I differentiate individual sounds in English.

Most learners in the interview confirmed that EDs helped them look for a more straightforward context of lexical items. From EDs, they tried to compare different possible meanings of each word and the appropriate context in which it would be used. They learned this from the illustrated examples and explanations on EDs.

> Diep: […] Looking for the words in a certain context is the thing I usually do with my EDs. Normally, I read the examples carefully to recognize their proper use.

> Loc: […] Lexical items in context are a must to take into account when it comes to vocabulary learning, so my priority is understanding each item in its real practice.

Word family or word class is another utilization of EDs from students. Three-quarters of learners went for this when they used EDs. They made use of this feature for better use of grammar in writing sentences.

> Hoa: […] I often look up word relations on my EDs. I want to use them correctly in my writing.

> Loan: […] I am bad at grammar, so EDs help me choose the right word class and write a sentence

better.

Searching for synonyms and antonyms is another use of students. Two-thirds of the interviewees said that EDs were the best resources for learning synonyms and antonyms, which were helpful for their flexible use of words in writing.

> Hoa: […] I do not want to repeat words in my writing and speaking, so I make use of EDs to examine synonyms as well as antonyms.

> Tuan: […] When I get stuck with word choice in writing, an ED is a good source for my reference […]. Through an ED, I can learn different words to express the same thing or to generate a contrasting meaning.

There are five other utilization options students have taken using EDs. However, only two or three students made use of these functions. These include checking for CEFR levels of vocabulary (whether the word is categorized as A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, or C2), looking for collocations (words used together), double checking the lexical items across some EDs, examining the grammatical structures of words, and looking up word spellings.

> Hoa: […] I want to know the CEFR of the words I am using, which is my second most often practice when using EDs.

> Loan: […] I usually check the prepositions or the adjectives which go with a certain noun on EDs.

> Diep: […] When I find an ED does not provide enough information or its information may be misleading, I use another ED to compare it.

> Trang: […] I sometimes look for plural forms of nouns, verbs used in the present tense, irregular singular verb forms, etc.

> Huy: […] I often misspell words, so via EDs, I can check my spelling.

Overall, EDs are widely used among Vietnamese EFL learners. They utilized both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries online and offline on their devices. Their choice for a certain ED comes from its popularity and its reliability. Moreover, the purposes of using EDs are also varied, two most popular of which are checking meanings and pronunciations, followed by looking up context, exploring word family, identifying synonyms and antonyms, and other less frequent practices like learning about CEFR, ascertaining collocations, double checking lexical items, studying grammar and improving spelling.

What are Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions of electronic dictionaries?

All Vietnamese EFL learners in the study have a positive attitude toward EDs, showing strong favor over them and recommending their presence in learning a language. They prefer EDs to paper dictionaries due to their beneficial aspects. However, learners also admit EDs could be a disturbing tool in some cases.

From a Beneficial Tool

A Convenient Tool for Learning Needs

All participants said that due to the portability of a mobile device, they can "carry" EDs everywhere and use them at any time. This is appropriate for a learner when they may encounter lexical items in class and everyday life.

> Hoa: […] EDs are very convenient. Whenever I must look up a new word, I do it on my mobile, even when I am not in class.

The use of EDs is also flexible, according to the learners.

> Loan: […] I don't need to know the exact spelling of a word. I can type a close spelling or some initial letters, and the EDs can suggest the exact word […] I once searched the word "chauffeur," but I did not remember its spelling. I then typed "chau," and the word "chauffeur" automatically came up.

> Tuan: […] I can change the target word I am looking up easily and may even find another new word added to my list […] I looked "compliment" up, and I accidentally typed "compliment," and this mistake helped me learn two easily confused new words.

EDs save time for users.

> Diep: […] I looked up vocabulary very fast. What you need to do is type the word, and a lot of information pops up, which helps you know everything about the word. Each lexical item only takes you some seconds.

> Thao: […] The speed is amazing. I can look up many words in a short time.

A Tool of Large Capacity and Prompt Updates

The majority of students believe that EDs can store unlimited amounts of vocabulary and information about each lexical item. These features allow them to get all knowledge of the item.

> Cuong: […] Electronic dictionaries deal with digital information, so they contain all the things I need about the words I look up, like the grammar of the word, the word family, the context used, the illustrations, and so on.

> Tuan: […] I never get bored with EDs, for they seem not to get restricted in vocabulary repertoire.

The huge database can be attributed to the frequent update.

> Loc: […] The ED I am using gets updated very often, so I see that some of the "trendy" words are on the list, and these words are recommended to me every time I go online for a new word.

> Quoc: […] I believe every ED is updated periodically, both in an application and on the website, so the database is always growing bigger.

A User-Friendly Dictionary

Every participant said all EDs are easy to use.

> Linh: […] The interface on every ED is catchy, which creates a simple look for every user.

Diep: […] I strongly believe that it is very simple for anyone to use EDs. What you all need is to be able to type on electronic devices.

An Interactive Tool

Most learners believe that EDs are highly interactive with easy-to-access features.

Loan: […] The interactive display on EDs can enable users to link every element in a single ED itself and even to other EDs […] When I take a look at the example which contains my target word, I do not understand some surrounding words, and I just click on them, and the click directs me to another page with that word.

Tuan: […] I used different features on one ED. For example, the Cambridge Dictionary has "translate" and "grammar" sections which I can refer to when I need. These features are linked together.

An Easy Accessibility

All students believe EDs are mostly free and available to every user.

Trang: […] Most EDs are free to use, and even if the free features are limited, they are all a learner needs.

Son: […] EDs are really cheap, even when you have to pay, so the accessibility to these dictionaries is really easy. You can find free EDs everywhere which are reliable.

To a Disturbing Tool

The first problem with using EDs is that it can make learners too dependent and therefore reduce critical thinking.

Linh: […] I think using EDs all the time discourages learners from thinking critically. They can believe all from the dictionaries without even processing the information they get.

Thao: […] EDs can lessen the guessing skills of learners when they turn to EDs for every word they don't know about. They do not bother to guess before making the look-up.

The huge database of EDs can lead to students' confusion if they have no ability to evaluate.

Son: […] When I came up with a new word and I found different information about that single word, I really found it hard to differentiate these shades of meanings.

Loc: […] If a learner cannot assess different contexts of a single word, the use of EDs leads to failure.

Another disadvantage is relying on an internet connection for online dictionaries.

Huy: […] I once got lost because of an internet connection failure. From that time, I tried to install an offline dictionary on my mobile, but if I wanted to use more than one function like the translation, my mobile has to get connected to the internet.

Thao: […] It's important to have the internet available to use all of EDs' functions. You can turn to an application on your mobile, but this application also requires internet connection.

There is a question of reliability for EDs, for there are too many types available.

> Cuong: […] There are different types and names of EDs available for free use, but not all of them are reliable enough. For example, I always must double-check the translation work from Google Translate, for its translation sounds awkward.

> Tuan: […] I have to combine different EDs at the same time, for some of the words I look up seemingly do not have the correct definitions or sufficient explanations.

> Hoa: […] Some translation functions in a dictionary are not accurate enough, so usually I have to compare what I have known and what is new to get the most precise information.

In conclusion, EFL Vietnamese learners show their positive views towards EDs, affirming that they bring significant advantages. EDs are convenient, extensively and continuously updated, user-friendly, interactive, and accessible. Besides, learners may experience some bothering elements, including excessive dependence, internet connection loss, confusion, and lack of reliability.

What can be done for better utilization of EDs?

Several challenges and difficulties have been found in EDs for language learning. However, Vietnamese EFL learners offer different tips and suggestions for using EDs more effectively.

An important part of teachers

10 out of 12 students stated that their teachers did not instruct them for the appropriate use of EDs, so they wished that learners would even do better if they were trained formally or informally in the use of EDs.

> Huy: […] From the beginning, I looked for an ED myself, and not any of my teachers instructed me how to use it correctly. What they had done was to recommend some sources of EDs […] I wish they would have given me some advice.

> Hoa: […] I think teachers play a supporting role in training their students to use EDs better. These include how to look for an appropriate ED, how to look up the words on EDs, how to think critically to get a reliable piece of information, etc.

Students also advised that there should be some tasks or activities in the classroom and at home which encourage students to use EDs.

> Trang: […] In the classroom, teachers should encourage their students to use EDs to look for information instead of asking teachers right away. This gets them into the habit of using EDs.

> Thao: […] A small activity like checking for the right meaning of a certain word in context can be conducted in a short time. If every teacher does this, their students' searching and thinking skills will be improved.

The other decisive part for learners

According to the participants, learners should practice thinking before accepting. This includes judging the information and comparing it with the one from other sources to come up with the most appropriate context for word use. Moreover, learners must try to guess the lexical items based on the context before turning to EDs.

Loan: […] It is advisable to evaluate different possible meanings of the word based on the context so that learners can select the best one.

Quoc: […] I think learners can practice guessing before looking up.

Another thing learners could do is take priority over a monolingual ED rather than bilingual EDs.

Trang: […] Figuring out everything in the target language is a perfect way to learn new vocabulary, so a monolingual ED is better than a bilingual one.

Linh: […] A bilingual ED is not always good, so spend as much time as possible on an L2 language for ultimate exposure to it.

Learners recommend that it is better to make use of all an ED's features. Some are "saving my favorite word," "word of the day," etc.

Son: […] There are a lot of tools on an ED which learners can use […] I often save my words on the ED I use for a better review.

Huy: […] The dictionary I am using daily recommends new words every day. Therefore, I can learn at least one new word a day.

The last proposal is combining different sources to make the best of EDs.

Loc: […] It's better to use more than one EDs. Learners can learn more lexical items and can synthesize the information better.

Son: Even though I only use one ED on a daily basis, I sometimes refer to another ED. I think this renews my vocabulary learning routine.

In conclusion, to better use EDs, there is a need for support from teachers and cognitive ability and awareness from learners.

Discussion

Vietnamese EFL learners' practices

The study suggests that learners prefer to use EDs, as previous research has found (Alhaisoni, 2016; Dashtestani, 2013; Töpel, 2014; Zamkova et al., 2023). The use of EDs among EFL Vietnamese learners is on a frequent basis, which takes place everywhere and at any time. This is in line with what has been found by El-Sawy (2019) and Zheng and Wang (2016). Also, Vietnamese learners utilized different types of EDs, both monolingual and bilingual, both offline and online, which were suggested in previous studies (Ayed, 2020; El-Sawy, 2019; Zamkova et al., 2023). The choice of certain EDs comes from their reliability and popularity. Some popular EDs Vietnamese EFL learners use are Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, TFLAT dictionary and Google Translate. This habit is similar to the finding by Hilary and Warwick (2000) when they stated Oxford Learner's Dictionaries and Cambridge Dictionary are the most popular ones, and Wei and Chang (2022) that confirmed Cambridge Dictionary and Google Translate are the most frequently used EDs.

The utilization of EDs was attributed to different purposes and situations. The primary purposes lie in meaning checking (Alhaisoni, 2016; Barham, 2017; Hilary & Warwick, 2000; Trinh et al., 2021) and pronunciation (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Barham, 2017; Hakim et al., 2020; Trinh et al., 2021; Zamkova et al., 2023). Some other usual situations, like looking for collocations, antonyms, and synonyms, were also found in this study and support Hilary and Warwick (2000) and Vakaliuk et al. (2021). Less frequent use, like looking for word family, examining word spelling, and finding examples, was also found. This agrees with other researchers in the same field (Alhaisoni, 2016; Barham, 2017; Zamkova et al., 2023).

This study found some new utilizations of EDs. Learners use EDs for searching CEFR information on lexical items, cross-checking information among EDs, and exploring grammar. What is more, although Zamkova et al. (2023) stated that EDs are good for translations, this study found that learners need to be cautious of the translation features of EDs, for they are not always reliable and therefore using different types of EDs to compare is necessary.

Vietnamese EFL learners' perceptions

Vietnamese EFL learners hold positive attitudes toward the use of EDs. Learners stated that the convenience of EDs brings them great experience for their vocabulary learning. This positive aspect supports previous findings, including the ones by Barham (2017), Hakim et al. (2020), Trinh et al. (2021), and Zamkova et al. (2023). The convenience, according to participants, is partly due to the flexibility and interactivity of EDs (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Tono, 2000), the time-saving nature of EDs (Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Trinh et al., 2021), and the portability of EDs. Moreover, this study also found that EDs are frequently updated with large databases, therefore bringing beneficial features to learners. Previous researchers identified this in their studies (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Zamkova et al., 2023; Zheng & Wang, 2016). Another reason to explain the positive attitudes of learners is the friendliness of EDs to users, which corresponds with conclusions from different scholars (Ambarwati & Mandasari, 2020; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Nugraha et al., 2019). Moreover, the free accessibility on the internet is the last explanation for the favor over EDs (Nugraha et al., 2019).

There are some difficulties which need to be taken into consideration. Similar to some previous studies, this paper concluded that lack of internet connection can be a problem with using EDs (Dashtestani, 2013; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Mohamad et al., 2017). Furthermore, the question of the reliability of EDs deserves consideration; as Mohamad et al. (2017) stated, some EDs do not contain sufficient information. This study found some new problems concerning the use of EDs. The first is the tendency to rely on EDs for use and less priority over critical thinking among learners. Students want to be fast in their looking up, and this skips the guessing and thinking stage before absorbing the new items. This finding may disagree with Zheng and Wang (2016), who found EDs improve learners' independence. Another is learners could be confused with the large amount of information they have to deal with. This is because not all EDs give a straightforward explanation and sufficient illustrations to fully understand a certain lexical item.

Suggestions for better use of EDs.

There are some tips and suggestions from learners for effective utilization of EDs, which are derived from both teachers and learners. For teachers, they should train, instruct students and conduct some activities to encourage learners to use EDs properly. A simple activity may be checking-for-word-meaning in a certain context. This finding about the role of teachers would be agreeable to a body of previous research (Alhaisoni, 2016; Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013; Barham, 2017; Dashtestani, 2013; El-Sawy, 2019; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Loucky, 2010). For students, they should practice critical thinking and compare different sources of EDs to make the best of vocabulary learning, with a priority over monolingual EDs. Also, learners should try to make use of as many features as possible on EDs. Some suggested utilization of an ED's features includes "favorite words" or "word of the day." These things can be achieved by training teachers (Dashtestani, 2013; Hojatpanah & Dashtestani, 2020; Wei & Chang, 2022). From these recommendations, it can be said that, in order to take maximum advantage of EDs, there would be a need for both teachers' instructions and learners' cognition.

Conclusion

This research examines the habitual practices and perceptions of electronic dictionaries, with a focus on Vietnamese EFL learners. Through this examination, suggestions are made for better utilization of EDs.

The study found learners frequently use different types of EDs, from monolingual to bilingual, both on the websites and on their mobiles, with different purposes. The primary ones include looking up meanings and checking pronunciations. Some other popular situations are ascertaining lexical context, checking word family, and identifying synonyms and antonyms. Some other less frequent uses are CEFR look-up, collocation examination, cross-checking practice, grammar learning and spelling adaptation. More interestingly, the identified reasons for choosing a certain ED are its popularity with learners and its reliability. Accordingly, Cambridge Dictionary, Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, TFLAT Dictionary and Google Translate are in the top four.

The paper concludes that Vietnamese EFL learners have strongly positive attitudes towards EDs. They believed that EDs are convenient, continuously updated, user-friendly, and accessible. However, learners also address some noticeable problems when using EDs, including lack of accessibility due to internet connection loss, confusion because of excessive information, and heavy dependence and unreliability. However, these problems can be lessened by training teachers in the proper use of EDs and self-awareness of learners in their learning habits, which includes thinking before accepting, using different sources with a favor over monolingual EDs, and making the best of EDs by exploring different features.

The findings contribute to the literature review on the use of EDs by language learners in general and their perceptions of this type of dictionary so that further development on this technological tool for language learning would be continuously made.

There is one primary limitation concerning the population and the sample in this research. It

only explores English majors at a faculty at a university in Vietnam, so to generalize the findings to a larger population, it would be better to conduct research into more subjects, including non-English majors at different universities. If this could be done, deeper and more extensive recommendations would be made for more effective utilization of EDs. Moreover, the study found that there are different preferences among learners for a certain ED, but the motivations behind their choice have not been explored; therefore, in further study, an exploration into reasons for choosing certain types of EDs can be done. Lastly, the research suggests that some learners prefer a monolingual dictionary, while others go for a bilingual one. Future research can be done into the effects of these types and the correlations between learners' language competence and their inclination towards the former or the latter.

Acknowledgment

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