

**A Suggested Course Based on Explicit Instruction for  
Developing Dictionary Usage Skills among English Majors at  
MUST**

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**Abstract**

*The purpose of this study was to develop some dictionary usage skills among 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors at Misr University for Science and Technology (MUST) in Fall 2014/ 2015 semester. The problem of the study was that 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors have not received a training or a course on how to use a monolingual English dictionary and that there was no material to be available for the students as it was clear from the semi-structured interview before the treatment. The participants in the study formed one study group who studied the suggested course based on explicit instruction. Two instruments were used; a semi- structured interview and a pre/ post dictionary usage skills test. The results of the semi-structured interview showed that 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors did not receive any explicit instruction on dictionary use. The results of the dictionary usage skills test revealed that the suggested course proved to be effective in developing the five target dictionary usages (spelling, pronunciation, meaning, syllable division, and parts of speech). Recommendations and suggestions for further research were also presented.*

**Keywords:** Dictionary usage, explicit instruction, monolingual, bilingual, learner's autonomy

**Introduction**

Dictionaries are considered supportive sources to language learners, especially to foreign language learners as they can supply a quick and direct access to the meaning of an unfamiliar word. In EFL contexts, the supportive role of dictionaries has been emphasized by both teachers and researchers (Tseng, 2009). The training on dictionary skills are considered essential and required because EFL learners may not be able to use the dictionaries efficiently without *explicit instruction*. (Wright, 1998; Fan, 2000; Su, 2003)

Many researchers such as Wright (1998); Fan(2000); Nakamura(2000); Nation(2001); Huang(2003) stated that the dictionary is apparent to be a necessary source of data concerning information about words and their correlated aspects, and is not only a classroom tool but an object of life long use. A dictionary is absolutely one of the most frequent, well-organized, readily accessible, most commonly used and inexpensive learning resources. It is a supply of information for FL language learners, providing them with information about the English words.

English dictionaries can play a considerable role in developing the English language usage among the EFL students if they are used correctly. In an EFL situation such as the colleges of foreign languages,

where the target language contribution is inadequate, a dictionary can be a valuable source to the English language. It provides the EFL students with essential linguistic and literary information, especially when teachers are busy and the learners are in charge of their own learning (Cubillo, 2002; Nation, 2003).

Li(1998) and Huang(2003) mentioned that EFL learners think dictionaries to be useful and logically familiar even necessary aids in language acquisition and have positively been long time companion to a lot of foreign language learners. This is because foreign language learning process implies the broad use of dictionaries that the present study aims to achieve through studying the different types of dictionaries, and the lexical data learners are looking for in dictionaries.

Research on English dictionaries and dictionary usage is insufficient and it has attracted the attention of language theorists and educators in the current decades although they play a crucial role in the learning and teaching of English as an FL. (Chi; Ng, 1998; Li, 1998; Hartmann, 1999; Diab; Hamdan, 1999; Ryu, 2005; Al- Oweimer, 2010). The results of such research showed that most college EFL learners are not competent dictionary users. Researches explained both a misunderstanding and dissatisfaction about dictionary consultation.

Taylor (1996) explained that using dictionaries has been of a fairly little interest for FL researchers and educators, and the negative view of dictionaries among FL instructors appears to explain clearly this avoidance. Many researchers and educators neglect using dictionaries; they think that consulting a dictionary is supposed to slow down reading and is time consuming. Many researchers e.g. Baxter(1980); Chi; Ng(1998); Rhoder; Huerster(2002); Taylor(2004); Pekar & Cutting (2012) recommended that it is essential for instructors to provide explicit instruction in how to use an English- English dictionary if students are expected to benefit from dictionary consultation. They suggested that dictionary usage skills should be integrated into the English syllabus. Instructors have to obviously determine to their students what the learning objectives are, and to present clear, unambiguous explanations of the skills and information structures they are offering related to dictionary usage.

### **Problem of the Study**

From the results of the pilot study constituted in the semi- structured interview , 3rd English majors at MUST mentioned that they have not received any training on dictionary usage, and have not got any material on how to use an English dictionary as it was clear from the booklist of the English department. The aim of the current study was to provide them

with a suggested course based on explicit instruction for developing dictionary usage among them.

**Questions of the Study:**

1. To what extent are English majors aware of the uses of the dictionary?
2. What strategy can be used to develop the dictionary usage skills through explicit instruction?
3. How is the suggested course effective in developing dictionary usage skills among 3rd year English majors at Misr University for Science and Technology (MUST)?

**Research Hypotheses**

To achieve the aim of the study, the following hypotheses were tested:

- 1- There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental study group in the overall pre/ post administration of the Achievement Test in favor of the post-administration.
- 2- The suggested course based on explicit instruction is effective in developing spelling, pronunciation, meaning, parts of speech and syllable division of an English dictionary among the study group.

**Delimitations of the Study**

This study is delimited to:

1. Five of the dictionary skills required for English majors at MUST including spelling, pronunciation, meaning, syllable division and parts of speech.
2. 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors enrolled in the course Lang 222, in Fall 2014/2015 in the department of English at the college of Foreign languages and Translation, MUST.
3. Paper English dictionaries (Webster's Merriam Collegiate Dictionary & Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English).

**Review of Literature**

The following section sheds more light on the main variables of the study which are the suggested course based on explicit instruction as an independent variable and developing dictionary usage skills as a dependant variable.

**Importance, Uses and Types of Dictionaries**

Dictionaries have long been acknowledged as useful learning tools and there are many different types of recent and specialized dictionaries available for EFL students. The dictionary is an essential language tool. It is considered as a lexical reference that organizes and accumulates information about words, collocations, and other lexical items.

Yorkey(1982); Bejoint(1994); Scholfield(1997) and Kirkness (2004) pointed out that a large series of dictionaries can be used in the teaching and learning of English as an FL. A good dictionary must be

accurate, complete, recent, to include clear definitions, give assistance to usage, and is easily accessible. An English dictionary is only a record of how English speakers used to define, pronounce, spell, and use the words of their language. A dictionary is one of the oldest and the most widespread books in cultured societies.

Gonzalez (1999) and Taylor (2004) introduced some of the considerations for instructors of choosing an English- English dictionary for FL learners. They explained that FL students need their teachers' assistance in choosing the most proper dictionary. They added that with the precise guidance and the training on consulting the English- English dictionaries FL students' language learning can be easier.

Yorkey(1982) and Thornbury ( 2002) ) stated that knowing a word includes knowing its written and spoken forms, its meanings and the words it is most commonly associated with, its derivation, how it is used in different situations, its frequency, its grammatical behavior, its connotations, and how it can be used as a verb, noun, adverb, etc. learners can individually find such information in a well-chosen dictionary.

- An English dictionary helps learners to get:

1. **Spelling:** Using the dictionary helps the learner to know the accepted spelling of every word, irregular verb forms, and plurals.
2. **Pronunciation:** It shows learners how words are pronounced including stress.
3. **Syllable Division:** It helps in spelling, pronouncing words and knowing where the word should be divided.
4. **Derivation:** A dictionary includes the history of each word, and its development until it becomes an English word.
5. **Meaning:** Every word has more than a single meaning. A dictionary gives different meanings of a word with illustrative sentences. Special and technical definitions are also listed.
6. **Part of speech:** These are determined by the actual use in a sentence. A dictionary shows whether the word is commonly used as a noun, pronoun, verb (transitive and intransitive), adjective, adverb, conjunction, or preposition.
7. **Use:** A dictionary explains the word mainly as a British or American word, formal or colloquial, dialectal, poetic, or slang. This information is often important in writing.
8. **Synonyms and antonyms:** They are both listed (words of the similar meanings or words of the opposite meanings) with explanation of the distinctions.
9. **General information:** A dictionary gives us information about persons and places within the alphabetical arrangements or in special sections at

the back. Some dictionaries give us the rules of spelling, a list of the colleges and universities in Canada and the United states.

Bejoint(1994); Hartmann (1999); Taylor(2003); and Kirkness (2004) discussed issues such as the comparison between the different types of dictionaries such as monolingual and multilingual dictionaries, passive and accessible dictionaries, generalized and specialized dictionaries, native speakers' and non-native speakers' dictionaries, and dictionaries for adults and dictionaries for children.

### **The Role of Dictionary Usage in Developing Learners' Autonomy**

As Chang (2002); Gairns; Redman (2005) and Leaney (2007) stated that a learner who uses the dictionary efficiently can continue learning outside the classroom, and this in turn makes him/ her autonomous when taking the decision concerning his own learning. To give our FL learners good learning habits, it is necessary to train them on using the dictionary frequently and efficiently and to choose the most appropriate ones that suit their learning purposes.

#### **Using Explicit Instruction in Dictionary Usage**

Pekar & Cutting (2012) explained that explicit *instruction* refers to the type of teaching where the instructor obviously determines what the learning objectives are to the students, and presents clear unambiguous clarifications of the skills and information structures they are offering. On the other hand implicit *instruction* refers to the type of teaching where the instructor does not determine such objectives or make such clarification but rather simply presents the information or problem to the learner and permits him to make their own comments. Pekar & Cutting (2012) conducted a study on 34 adult readers from 21 to 36 years of age at Vanderbilt University to decide which is more effective explicit or implicit instruction .The results of the study showed that average readers had to do more effort to learn through implicit instruction. For them explicit instruction was the more successful method. Another finding was that previous reading ability might be an important component to consider when choosing a teaching method. They recommended that skills and strategies for using dictionaries should be taught in FL classrooms, for students are not only learning about dictionaries but also about language. Such explicit instruction should continue throughout the students' academic careers rather than being relegated to a class period or two at the beginning of the term.

Baxter(1980); Chi; Ng(1998); Rhoder; Huerster(2002) and Taylor(2004) recommended that it is essential for instructors to provide *explicit instruction* on how to use an English- English dictionary if students are expected to benefit from dictionary consultation. They

suggested that dictionary usage skills should be integrated into the English syllabus.

### **English Majors and Dictionary usage**

EFL learners' use of dictionary has been discussed by many researchers from many perspectives; some discussed the effect of dictionary usage on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension (Hanson; Padua 2011; Stahl 2005). Others focused on the accuracy of EFL learners' dictionary usage Nesi (2002); Diamond and Gulohn (2006) and Pous i(2010) and the effect of the different types of dictionaries on EFL learners such as the monolingual, the bilingual dictionaries( Laufer2000; Tomaszczyk 1979).

Tomaszczyk (1979) was the pioneer and the first researcher to start a study on the dictionary use by non- native speakers of English. He conducted a study based on Polish learners at the university level for foreign language teachers, and translators. Although subjects' responses in the study were positive with the use of monolingual dictionaries, yet, the majority preferred to use the bilingual over monolingual dictionaries. Aust, Kelly(1993); Atkins & Varantola(1997) ; Li, (1998); Hartmann, 1999) as cited in Ryu (2005)are recent studies that focused mainly on dictionary use training In all these studies, most EFL students pointed out that they received dictionary use training. A study by Laufer (2000) showed that the unskilled dictionary users performed better in comprehension and production when using a bilingual dictionary, as opposed to using a monolingual dictionary. A study carried out by Beck; McKeon; Kucan (2002) emphasized the relationship between the reading proficiency and the training on using the dictionary. Mckeon (1993; 2006; 2009) and Graves (2006) included the teaching of dictionary usage skills among the essential pre-requisites of teaching words, vocabulary, and reading.

### **Method**

#### **Participants of the Study**

The participants included (34) third year English majors at Misr University of Science & Technology (MUST), Egypt. The study included one study group in Fall 2014/ 2015semester. The study used the pre/ post Quasi –Experimental design.

#### **Instruments of the study**

The study used two instruments: the semi- structured interview and the dictionary skills test (pre/ post).

A Semi-structured interview was designed to provide the researcher with the qualitative data while the dictionary usage skills test was

designed to obtain quantitative data. The semi- structured interview included (8) questions that were discussed with the English majors at the beginning of study. They were asked if they have received any training or a course in dictionary usage, the types of dictionaries that they know, and the difficulties they usually face when using an English dictionary. (Appendix: 4)

### **A Dictionary Usage Skills Test**

The dictionary usage skills test that was administered to 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors at MUST consisted of six sections. It was designed to assess the English majors' five uses of the dictionary (spelling, meaning, pronunciation, parts of speech, and syllable division). The total score of the test was: 75. Each of the five sections was scored out of (15) marks. Each section included (5) questions, except the spelling section that included 10 questions. The test lasted (90) minutes. The test was administered before and after the treatment of the suggested course.

### **Validity of the dictionary usage Test**

To ensure the validity of the dictionary usage skills test, the first version of the test was presented to a panel of jury members. Their suggestions were put into consideration. The 1<sup>st</sup> version (Appendix: 2) of the test included four main sections. The jury suggested deleting sections: 1, 3; 4 and focusing only on five of the uses of the dictionary instead. The researcher considering their suggestions, designed another (2<sup>nd</sup>) version (Appendix: 3) that included only five of the uses of the dictionary (the sections of the test) and tried to include more questions that help students apply what they have studied in the course in using the dictionary rather than theoretical ones. Then, the test was administered (pre/ post) to the participants of the study.

### **Reliability of the Test**

The final version of the test was administered to (24) third year English majors at MUST (not included in the main treatment of the study). Cronback's Alpha (Payne, 1997) was used to calculate the reliability coefficient of the test. The calculated coefficient was 0.89. Thus, the dictionary skills test was reliable to be used in assessing the dictionary usages of English majors at MUST.

### **The Treatment**

- **The main objectives of the suggested course were to:**
- Develop five of the dictionary usages among the participants of the study through using explicit instruction to facilitate acquiring dictionary usage skills as it was considered necessary for teaching

the dictionary usage skills to EFL by many educators and researchers (Chi; Ng, 1998; Taylor, 2004; Pekar; Cutting, 2012).

- Give the participants of the study a theoretical background about the definition of the dictionary, its types, considerations when choosing an English dictionary, and at least some of the usages of the dictionary.
- Teach the participants explicitly some of the most common symbols, abbreviations, acronyms, and affixes used in the dictionary with their meanings. During the six sessions of the course, the researcher taught the five usages of the English dictionary and some extra information explicitly to 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors during the regular time of the lecture. Each session lasted about (3) hours weekly. The treatment of the study lasted about (6) weeks during the semester of Fall 2014/ 2015. For the contents of the complete sessions, see (Appendix 4). Every session followed the following procedures:

### **Session 1**

#### **The definition and usages of the dictionary**

##### **1. Objectives of the session**

By the end of this session, English majors will be able to:

- define the word “dictionary” correctly.
- mention at least five of the uses of the monolingual English dictionary.
- mention some of the characteristics of a good dictionary.

##### **2. Warm- up**

The researcher asked a few questions to arouse the students’ attention and

Test their prior knowledge.

##### **3. Briefing (Direct instruction).**

The researcher introduced the definition/s of the word “dictionary”, its types from different perspectives, and its (9) uses. She gave the students a chance to add to these uses.

##### **4. Practice**

By using a photocopied page from any of the two English dictionaries (Webster& Longman), the researcher explained some of the symbols and abbreviations. (For example: *AmE; BrE; n.pl etc*).

## 5. Evaluation

By the end of the session, the researcher asked the students some of the questions related to the content covered in the session to test the students' understanding.

### Results and Discussion

This section discusses the results of the dictionary usage skills test supported by the relevant responses from the semi- structured interview.

### Results of the Semi- structured Interview

The analysis of data collected from the semi- structured interview showed that:

- Almost all of the participants of the study (3rd year English majors (100%) have not received training on using an English dictionary.
- Very few students (20%) mentioned that they have got dictionaries but most of them are invaluable or pocket dictionaries not suitable for their study purposes. They mentioned that they received them as text books or heard about them.
- Many students (70%) mentioned that they prefer dictionaries that can help them in their study purposes, especially in translation (from Arabic to English, and from English to Arabic, interpretation, dubbing, and Consecutive translation.
- Most students (80%) reported that they used to use the dictionary mostly to check only spelling or meaning.
- Most of the English majors (90%) had problems in understanding many symbols in the dictionary, and they thought that using an English- English dictionary is a complicated process to do.
- Nearly all the students (100%) could not differentiate between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries although some of them use both types.

To present the statistical results of the dictionary skills test and the effectiveness of the suggested course, the researcher used **Blake Modified Gain Ratio** to test the effectiveness of the suggested course. **Hypothesis one** stated that "There is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the experimental study group in the overall pre/ post administration of the Achievement Test in favor of the post- administration".

In order to test this hypothesis T. test for paired samples was used to determine the significance of the differences in the mean scores of the experimental group in the dictionary usage in the pre-test.

**Table (1) T. Test results in the mean scores of the experimental group in the pre/ and post test in the dictionary usage skills**

Test	N	Mean	SD	T value	Sig.
Pre	34	20.07	4.3	36.53	Effective at the level of 0.01
Post	34	55.07	8.2		

Table (1) shows the significance level of the mean scores of the study group in the pre/ and post test. The results proved that the suggested course is effective at the level of 0.01.

**Hypothesis Two** stated that the suggested course based on explicit instruction is effective in developing spelling, pronunciation, meaning, parts of speech and syllable division of an English dictionary among the study group.

**Table (2) T. Test results in the mean scores of the study group in the pre/ and post test in the five uses of the dictionary**

Dic. Usage	N	Df	Mean	Std. Deviation	T	Effectiveness
Spelling pre/	34	33	3.8235	1.14072	28.2	Effective at the level of 3.43
post			12.1176	1.99263		
Pronunciation Pre /	34	33	3.3529	1.12499	16.5	Effective at the level of 1.04
Post			8.2353	2.04582		
Meaning pre/	34	33	4.5588	1.15971	33	Effective at the level of 2.45
post			11.5147	1.87279		
Part of speech pre/	34	33	3.9853	1.09049	31	Effective at the level of 3.04
Post			11.8676	1.76373		
Syllable division pre/	34	33	5.7353	6.91642	5.1	Effective at the level of 204
post			11.9559	1.70724		

Table (2) shows the significance level of the difference between the mean scores of study group in the pre/ and post test in the five uses of the dictionary included in the suggested course and its effectiveness in developing the dictionary use skills among 3<sup>rd</sup> year English majors.

It is clear from the above table that the suggested course was effective in developing the five dictionary uses (**Spelling, Pronunciation, Meaning, Parts of Speech, and Syllable Division**).

There were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the participants in the pre/ post dictionary skills test. In the dictionary use of spelling, the  $t$  value was: 28.2. It means that there were significant statistical differences between the pre/ and post mean scores of the participants in the dictionary skills test. Teaching spelling explicitly proved to be effective through the suggested course. The table also shows that pronunciation had a  $t$  value of (16) which proves that the suggested course succeeded in developing the participants' pronunciation effectively. The effectiveness of the course in teaching pronunciation was at a level of (1.04). The usage of meaning had a ( $t$ ) value of (33) which proves that there were statistically significant differences between the mean scores of the participants in the pre/ post test in the use of meaning.

Table (2) reveals that the suggested course was effective in developing the five target uses of the English dictionary as it is clear from the value of  $t$  and the difference in the mean scores of the participants in the pre/ and post test. Some of the participants still need more training on the usage of pronunciation that was because a number of the participants

(10%) did not receive a direct instruction in phonetics or phonology before studying in this course; dictionary usage. So, the current study recommends studying phonetics as a prerequisite before registering in this course: dictionary usage & vocabulary. The results of the study proved that the suggested course had a significant role in raising the awareness of the participants in the uses of the dictionary although they did not receive explicit instruction in such uses as it was clear from the discussion in the semi- structured interview. This reflects that 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> questions of the study were answered and hypothesis two is verified.

### **Discussion**

The results of the dictionary usage skills test and the analysis of data collected from the semi- structured interview in the current study and the statistical treatment proved that the suggested course was effective in dictionary usage based on explicit instruction among English majors at MUST. These positive results are in agreement with the results of

Hanson; Padua (2011); NICH D (2000). The results of the semi-structured interview were important for eliciting the main content of the course as it came mainly from the students' study needs.

### **- Conclusions and Recommendations for Further Research**

#### **Conclusions**

This study attempted to develop mainly five of the dictionary uses among 3<sup>rd</sup> English majors at MUST through a suggested course designed by the researcher. So, there is not a text book or a fixed material to be taught to the English majors on dictionary usage. The researcher aimed at providing the participants of the study with material through a designed course that included six sessions based on explicit instruction. A semi-structured interview and a dictionary usage skills test was used pre/ and post of the treatment. Results of the achievement test showed that the suggested course was effective in developing the (5) target dictionary uses. Data collected from the semi-structured interview showed that English majors did not receive any training or explicit instruction in dictionary use. The findings of the study were in agreement with other studies dealt with the same criteria (e.g.. Chi & Ng, (1998); Hanson; Padua (2011)). The final conclusion reported some of the difficulties the English majors face when using an English dictionary.

#### **Recommendations for Further research**

- Further studies can be conducted in other uses of the dictionary, e.g. collocations, synonyms and antonyms, derivation etc.
- For those who are interested in conducting other researches in the field of FL, they can choose other resources that foster learning such as using electronic dictionaries.
- A comparative study of the age effects in using dictionaries can also be conducted.
- The effect of gender of EFL learners on dictionary use can be investigated.
- Extra emphasis on using explicit instruction in other language arts can be investigated
  - A research on developing secondary school dictionary skills as a pre-requisite for dictionary use in the university level can also be conducted.
- A comparative study on university students' use of the electronic and paper dictionaries can also be conducted.

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