
Utilizing Online Resources in Writing Classes:

Weaving the Right Words into a Tapestry of Writing

Naoko KATO and Christopher DAVANZO

Abstract

Choosing a word that delivers one's thoughts best is a challenging task for many language learners. Useability of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries for this target population is a significant issue. Benefits are varied based on the students' needs, and thus research supports taking advantage of different types of dictionaries as learning resources for better outcomes in vocabulary learning. Although the effectiveness of off and online dictionary use has been discussed extensively in studies, more often than not the context in research is vocabulary acquisition in reading. Research exploring methods for guiding students to explore searching for a proper word for their own writing is more rare. When writing one's thoughts and choosing the best word, the writer arguably needs more assistance than when reading. The focus of this paper, the Microsoft Word synonym feature is one tool that can be used by students during the writing process to find the best word for their intended use when paired with online language learner friendly monolingual dictionaries. The authors demonstrate step-by-step how students can use this widely available tool as a starting point to find an appropriate word through the generated synonyms which serve as clues for more effective dictionary use.

Introduction

A struggle many students encounter when expressing their ideas is choosing the appropriate words for what they want to express. Selecting accurate vocabulary to express one's thoughts is not an easy task. Even when

students think they have successfully found the right words, their ideas may be either ambiguous or confusing. Last semester Ms. Kato was reading a student's paper, and encountered a peculiar phrase, "an existing dog." It was literally translated from Japanese to English and thus was rather awkward. As a result of this type of inaccurate translation, the reader may find herself in a mental maze of trying to figure out what the writer meant to express. Motivated students are striving to gain as much vocabulary as possible and thus spend a considerably long time and mental energy in acquiring the target language vocabulary. Conveying one's ideas effectively is essential, and accurate vocabulary acquisition is a vital skill since words are the basis of language and the means to becoming a competent communicator. The acquisition of reading, listening, writing, and speaking skills are the basis of learning a language and vocabulary is the foundation of them all (Panduangkaew, 2018). There are sound reasons why teachers should prioritize coaching students on how to utilize online resources to increase vocabulary and improving language proficiency.

The Importance of Increasing Vocabulary

Guiding students to efficient vocabulary acquisition is critical for successful language learning. Students are likely to learn vocabulary more effectively and efficiently through utilizing the concepts behind the Task-induced Involvement Load Hypothesis (TILH) which states that vocabulary tasks are more efficient when they promote direct learner involvement (Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001). Yorgancı and Subasi (2022) further explained that the more attention and effort spent in learning vocabulary, the better "vocabulary gain" and "vocabulary retention" the students can achieve (p. 1183). Although studies have focused mainly on reading, this strategy can certainly apply for writing as well. When producing a paper, students are active researchers who venture out into the field of language where they hope to excavate the perfect words. In order to accomplish this goal, most students use a bilingual electronic or online dictionary to find a word that can convey their thoughts successfully. However, oftentimes words that are directly translated do not bear the same meaning as the original (Yu, 2020), therefore it is apparent that

there is the need for students to have specific training.

Acquiring proper vocabulary knowledge is essential for effective communication (Boontam, 2022; Huang et al., 2016; Yorgancı & Subasi, 2022), and students should develop the ability to employ appropriate words in a given context by using a dictionary. In fact, Lews (2016), posited that dictionaries are an important source of “reassurance” for the students while writing (as cited in Baskın & Mumcu, 2018). However, despite the frequent use of dictionaries, many university students tend to express themselves by stringing words together as best as they can, but ultimately fail to accurately communicate their ideas, creating a gap between their intentions and their ability for expression. Novice ESL students tend to rely heavily on bilingual dictionaries, and the word-for-word translations create the communication rift between writer and reader. However, the type of dictionary that students utilize can help them more accurately express themselves.

Monolingual and Bilingual Dictionaries

Dictionaries, especially bilingual dictionaries, are one of the more popular supporting materials to which students seek consultation when writing papers. Indeed, dictionaries are great instruments to improve vocabulary (Ahangari & Dogolsara, 2015). In particular, Krashen (1989) explained that advising novice or lower level students to consult dictionaries is especially beneficial for L2 learners (as cited in Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020, p. 20). However, most students prefer bilingual dictionaries over monolingual dictionaries (Panduangkaew, 2018; Kol, 2021). Students choose bilingual dictionaries mainly because they believe them to be “simpler” to understand (Thornbury, 2002 as cited in Panduangkaew, 2018, p. 120). However, heavy reliance on bilingual dictionaries often leads to inappropriate word-for-word translations which many teachers encounter in both speaking and writing. As Yu (2020) stated, some words may not share the exact same translation. This discrepancy is a key point that teachers need to keep in mind when guiding their students on how to best use their dictionaries. Furthermore, Abbasi et al. (2019) explained that although students do acknowledge the benefits of using a monolingual dictionary, the difficulty of understanding the words used in the definitions

hinders students from actively utilizing them. However, Panduangkaew (2018) described the importance of using both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries effectively in the course of learning vocabulary (p. 122). It is important for both students and teachers to keep in mind the benefits each type of dictionary offers. Bilingual dictionaries can help students understand the vocabulary more “clearly” (p. 123) while monolingual dictionaries offer “comprehensive information” on the target vocabulary (p. 122). Despite the fact that both types of dictionaries do have advantages, some scholars point out the particular effectiveness of using monolingual dictionaries. In fact, Ahangari and Dogolsara (2015) conducted a study on evaluating Iranian intermediate EFL students’ vocabulary acquisition using both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. They discovered that monolingual dictionaries are more effective in acquiring new words as they can understand and utilize the newly learned words appropriately (p. 147). However, since students have various learning needs, it is probably not useful to state which dictionary is “better” than the other (Baskin & Mumcu, 2018; Panduangkaew, 2018) For instance, Baskin and Mumcu reported that those students whose language proficiency is higher preferred monolingual dictionaries, most likely because their “vocabulary knowledge” (p. 110) has reached the point where they can understand the English definitions and examples. Monolingual dictionaries have more comprehensive information on the words so these higher-level students feel that it is more meaningful to use them. Baskin and Mumcu also described the case of Sudanese EFL students. They reported that more Sudanese students preferred monolingual dictionaries than bilingual dictionaries. Monolingual dictionaries have unique advantages for increasing vocabulary knowledge, particularly as applied to writing, and therefore teachers would do well to encourage their use in the classroom.

Raising Awareness of Online Dictionaries

Almost all students are familiar with basic technology, so accessing learning resources is easier than it has ever been and free online dictionaries are readily available. Due to their easy accessibility and user-friendly nature, many students are motivated to use online tools to promptly find the most

appropriate words or phrases they need. Ms. Kato and Mr. Davanzo have observed that students tend to prefer Google Translate over bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. Teachers can utilize online dictionaries as they are a great source for their vocabulary acquisition, but students may not be properly trained to use these dictionaries (Baskın & Mumcu, 2018; Panduangkaew, 2018) and thus it is important to teach them to use them appropriately. In fact, on the first day of classes, Ms. Kato and Mr. Davanzo introduce online dictionaries that many students may not even know exist. Teachers should emphasize the importance of reputable online dictionaries as they are free, accessible, and credible. For writing classes, students work on multiple drafts in class which allows them to discuss expanding their ideas for the first draft with their teacher. At the brainstorming and first draft stage, for the sake of allowing students to freely express their ideas, the use of dictionaries may not be the priority concern. However, when students are constructing the subsequent draft where they are organizing and developing their ideas in a more concrete manner, consultation about word usages with each other and their teacher is quite beneficial. Students work on their first and second drafts in class so students can seek assistance from their teachers to develop their ideas as well as help each other. Both Ms. Kato and Mr. Davanzo teach students how to use online dictionaries effectively.

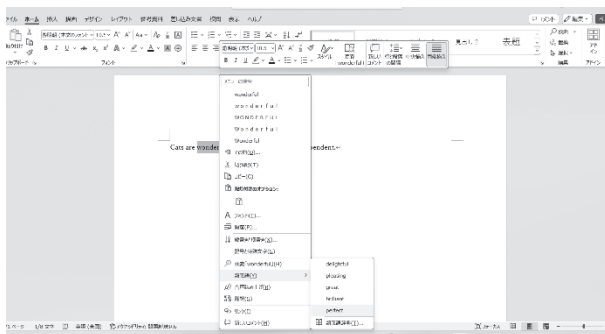
However, once they are in the situation where they have to work alone, they often get stuck and use some translating devices which may result in lost opportunities to learn new worthwhile vocabulary. However, encouraging students to use online dictionaries can be challenging because of their mindset concerning vocabulary acquisition.

Effective Use of Online Dictionaries and Microsoft Word

Learning vocabulary by rote memorization is common in Japan. This practice may be due to the pressure to memorize as much vocabulary as possible for exams, especially university entrance exams. However, this learning method probably interferes with the accurate interpretation of the meanings. Students need to understand the appropriate definitions of words. Shaw (2011) demonstrated the effectiveness of learning vocabulary through

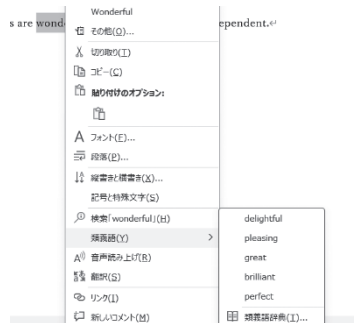
studying synonyms in her study (as cited in Boontam, 2022, p.81). Therefore, incorporating online dictionaries along with synonyms as a means to find suitable words helps students in their writing.

As previously mentioned, students need some assistance to find the right words to express their thoughts appropriately. During the writing of their second draft, many students tend to rely on their bilingual dictionaries or a translator on their smartphones such as Google Translate. Instead, teachers can instruct them to use a more constructive method. As a first step, the moment students have trouble producing appropriate words, they can employ Microsoft Word to help them choose the proper words they need. Most of the students are not aware that Microsoft Word has a feature that can help them write and get them away from always using a bilingual dictionary or online translation service: a built-in thesaurus. They are usually surprised to see that they have immediate access to a list of synonyms on the same screen they are writing their paper on. Students only have to first think of a basic word in English. Then with just a quick click or two, they can see a list of synonyms, which usually includes some new words that they have never seen before. This quick and simple accessibility is appealing for students and therefore enables them to use this feature more readily. The image below illustrates how students can easily find the list of synonyms by highlighting and right-clicking the word:



Although the Microsoft Word thesaurus is an English content material, it is not so overwhelming for students to simply use this synonym generator

feature and then choose the word or words they need to look up on an online monolingual dictionary to confirm their meaning and see if they are appropriate for what they want to convey.



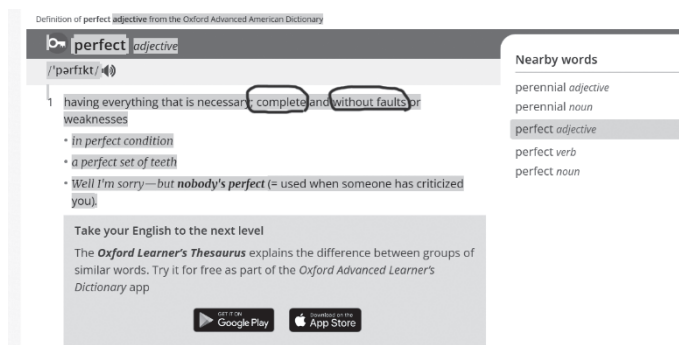
As can be seen the image above, the list of synonyms is rather short, and thus students do not find it daunting.

As a following step, students can choose a word or words from the list and start investigating their meanings using an online monolingual dictionary. Here, teachers need to reinforce the importance of looking up the words from the synonym list on online monolingual dictionaries to find the appropriate words for their writing. Furthermore, in the process of leading them to use online monolingual dictionaries, as scholars (Ahangari & Dogolsara, 2015, p.148) have discovered, teachers need to encourage students who are not keen to use monolingual dictionaries. Needless to say, especially those with lower language proficiency levels may need more assistance. As stated earlier, using a regular online monolingual dictionary might be discouraging for students as it usually employs language that is suitable for native speakers of English. The words are often rather difficult and the explanations are longer. Therefore, it is important to introduce a monolingual dictionary that is user friendly even for novices. In addition, some students may choose an inappropriate synonym by merely grabbing the top word from the synonym list just because they are overwhelmed by the seemingly endless strings of words. Thankfully, there are several online monolingual dictionaries as listed below that are suitable for EFL and ESL students.

Suitable Online Monolingual Dictionaries for ESL/EFL Students:

- Merriam Webster (Kid's Definitions)
- Oxford Learner's Dictionary (ESL/EFL)
- Cambridge Learner's Dictionary (ESL/EFL)

Among the dictionaries Ms. Kato and Mr. Davanzo have used in class, Merriam-Webster and Oxford Learner's Dictionary are by far the most user-friendly monolingual dictionaries for lower and intermediate level students. In any case, whichever dictionaries a teacher chooses, it is important that they should supply definitions suitable for children, (as Merriam-Webster does), and also for learners of English as a foreign language, (as Oxford Learner's Dictionary does). The words employed in the definitions are less advanced and therefore more appropriate for ESL students. These dictionaries are great tools for students to learn vocabulary by themselves, which demonstrates that an online monolingual dictionary functions as an easy access, "self-learning tool" (Baskin & Mumcu, 2018, p. 102). In addition, when students read the definitions in class, instructors can assist them by providing strategies for reading and understanding them efficiently by demonstrating the necessity of identifying the keywords that they need to focus on while reading the definitions.



Moreover, there are example sentences that help students understand exactly what the words mean and how to use them. Teachers can also have

students create their own sentences as well as practice how to use new words. This activity can be done at the beginning of the course, the middle, and at the end to ensure that students master how to use a monolingual dictionary appropriately. Furthermore, as part of a class activity, demonstrating how to find proper words by using actual examples from students is immensely helpful as some students may be looking for the same word. Writing teachers can greatly facilitate the learning of accurate vocabulary by instructing students to utilize online monolingual dictionaries in tandem with tools such as Microsoft Word's built-in thesaurus.

Conclusion

Learning accurate vocabulary is important for language acquisition as it is essential to communicate and to express oneself whether through speaking or writing. Choosing the right word to convey one's opinion is an essential skill, but it requires patience and language knowledge. Students often face the frustration of finding a suitable word and that may put them in the situation where they feel discouraged and hinder them from actively improving their language because they are mentally exhausted. Students may be tempted to simply grab the top word from a list of words and lay it out in a sentence as quickly as possible, but without understanding what it really means, thus opening the door to misunderstandings, confusion, or even nonsense. Students are familiar with technology and prone to use the device that offers the answer instantly. Therefore, taking advantage of online resources, especially monolingual dictionaries, is a practical choice to improve student vocabulary knowledge. Teachers can greatly assist students in utilizing both the built-in Microsoft Word thesaurus and online monolingual dictionaries to select the most appropriate word so they can convey their thoughts and ideas as intended.

References

- Abbasi, W., Ahmad, M. M., & Mohammed, F. A. E. (2019). Learners' perceptions of monolingual dictionaries in learning English as a foreign language. *International*

- Journal of Education and Literacy Studies*, 7(3), 10–18. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7575/aiac.ijels.v7n.3p.10>
- Alahmadi, A., & Foltz, A. (2020). Exploring the effect of lexical inferencing and dictionary consultation on undergraduate EFL students' vocabulary acquisition. *PLoS ONE*, 15(7), 1–25. <https://doi-org.nanzan-u.idm.oclc.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236798>
- Ahangari, S., & Dogolsara, S. A. (2015). Comparing the effect of using monolingual versus bilingual dictionary on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' vocabulary learning. *English Language Teaching*, 8(6), 141–149. <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/elt.v8n6p141>
- Baskin, S., & Mumcu, M. (2018). Dictionary culture of university students learning English as a foreign language in Turkey. *International Education Studies*, 11(3), 101–114. <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v11n3p101>
- Boontam, P. (2022). The effect of teaching English synonyms through data-driven learning (DDL) on Thai EFL students' vocabulary learning. *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 10(2), 80–91. <https://doi.org/10.34293/education.v10i2.4458>
- Huang, C. S. J., Yang, S. J. H., Chiang, T. H. C., & Su, A. Y. S. (2016). Effects of situated mobile learning approach on learning motivation and performance of EFL students. *Educational Technology & Society*, 19(1), 263–276.
- Kol, S., & Schcolnik, M. (2021). Monolingual and bilingual online dictionary tools for academic reading. *TESL-EJ*, 24(4), 1–15.
- Krashen, S. (1989). We acquire vocabulary and spelling by reading: Additional evidence for the input hypothesis. *Modern Language Journal*, 73(4), 440–464. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.1989.tb05325.x>
- Laufer, B., & Hulstijn, J. (2001). Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language: The construct of task-induced involvement. *Applied Linguistics*, 22(1), 1–26.
- Lew, R. (2016). Can a dictionary help you write better? A user study of active bilingual dictionary for Polish learners of English. *International Journal of Lexicography*, 29(3), 353–366. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijl/ecw024>
- Panduangkaew, R. (2018). An analysis of vocabulary learning strategies employed

- by Thai EFL undergraduates: Dictionary use. *REFlections*, 25(1), 116–125.
- Shaw, E. M. (2011). *Teaching vocabulary through data-driven learning*. [Master's thesis, Brigham Young University]. <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/3024>
- Yorganci, M., & Subasi, G. (2022). The effects of task induced involvement load hypothesis on Turkish EFL learners' incidental vocabulary learning. *International Online Journal of Education and Teaching*, 9(3), 1181–1202.
- Yu, X. (2020). Equivalence in bilingual dictionaries. *English Language Teaching*, 13(12), 1–4. <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v13n12p1>