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## English as a Foreign Language University (EFL) Students' Perception of Dictionary Use and Training

Percepción del uso y capacitación del diccionario por parte de estudiantes universitarios de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE)

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### ABSTRACT:

This article examines students' perceptions of dictionary use and training in English as a Foreign Language (EFL). The needs of English as a foreign language students in terms of specific dictionary types have received little attention. This research was conducted with 48 English as a foreign language students at a public university in Costa Rica over a year. The researcher used a survey (Appendix 1) to collect students' opinions about the role of the dictionary in their major. Data indicates that: 1) not all dictionary types are known and used by students, 2) students favor the electronic dictionary over the paper dictionary, and 3) dictionary instruction is weak despite its perceived importance by learners. These conclusions are consistent with the literature surveyed. Furthermore, students' opinions suggest that dictionary instruction and exposure have not been adequately approached in the language educational program. These results should advance new educational policies that promote the systematic and progressive inclusion of dictionary instruction across the study plan.

**KEYWORDS:** Dictionary Types, Dictionary Training, Foreign Language Instruction, Learning Techniques.

### RESUMEN:

Este artículo estudia la percepción de estudiantes de Inglés como Lengua Extranjera (ILE) sobre el uso y capacitación en el uso del diccionario. Las necesidades del estudiantado de inglés como lengua extranjera acerca de tipos de diccionarios específicos ha recibido poca atención. Esta investigación se llevó a cabo en una Universidad pública de Costa Rica con 48 estudiantes de inglés como lengua extranjera durante un año. Por medio de una encuesta, el investigador recolectó las opiniones del estudiantado sobre el papel del diccionario en su carrera. Los resultados indican que 1) no todos los tipos de diccionarios son usados o conocidos por las personas estudiantes, 2) el cuerpo estudiantil favorece el uso del diccionario electrónico sobre el diccionario impreso, 3) la capacitación en el uso del diccionario es débil a pesar de la importancia percibida por parte de las personas estudiantes. Estas conclusiones concuerdan con la literatura consultada. Además, las opiniones de las personas estudiantes sugieren que la exposición a diversos tipos de diccionarios y su capacitación no ha sido enfocada adecuadamente en el programa educativo de la lengua. Estos resultados deberían promover nuevas políticas educativas que promueven una inclusión sistemática y progresiva de la capacitación en el uso del diccionario en el plan de estudios.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Tipos de diccionario, Capacitación de diccionarios, Enseñanza de una lengua extranjera, Técnica de aprendizaje.

### INTRODUCTION

The dictionary is one of the most commonly used resources in language learning. Most students and former students of a foreign language may remember having used one or several types of dictionaries. Among them, bilingual and monolingual dictionaries dominate the foreign language landscape. However, not all dictionaries serve the same purpose. Battenburg (2017) mentions that "no single dictionary can adequately serve all users. A variety of dictionaries are required to suit the backgrounds, needs, and expectations of

individual language learners” (p. 24). Fortunately, the myriad of possibilities in terms of dictionary format and type have been growing in the last few years.

Nonetheless, teaching programs have often failed to exploit the different options available to students. Thus, this investigation explores senior students’ perceptions of dictionary use in the core courses or the B.A. in English and B.A. in English Teaching at a public university. Dictionaries have been proven to promote individual learning in various linguistic areas such as grammar, pronunciation, reading, and lexicon (Bishop, 2000; Chan, 2011; Prichard, 2008). However, their usefulness has not been fully explored since “much of the previous research gives limited attention to the use of different types of dictionaries over an extended learning period as distinct from their use in a single language test, or a relatively short study period” (Alharbi, 2016, p. 124). In addition, research has often been limited to the most basic types of dictionaries only. Since the present study involves non-native English speakers who are enrolled in an English major or English teacher major, knowing their perceptions on several types of dictionaries becomes crucial to better prepare them for the academic world and the job market.

Currently, the B.A. in English and B.A. in English Teaching do not systematically offer any instruction on dictionary use. In this sense, professors are not required to introduce students to the various types of dictionaries or provide any training on how to use them or where to find them. Additionally, the syllabi of the core courses sporadically require or suggest the use of a monolingual dictionary, except for first-year courses where a bilingual dictionary may be recommended. Furthermore, except for writing courses, dictionary use is not promoted, incentivized, or required for most schoolwork.

In this regard, the conclusions of this paper will directly benefit the two groups. First, the university will gain a broader perspective of how students perceive dictionary use in their major. In turn, this information will help establish curricular changes to establish concrete guidelines on what dictionaries to use, what courses should introduce each kind of dictionary, and what level of instruction should be devoted to each type. Second, this information will benefit students since they will find more and better materials, activities, and instruction targeted at their specific needs. Dictionary use is an essential component of the academic world and a necessary asset for virtually any job that requires a speaker of several languages. Indirectly, other institutions should revise the amount of emphasis and the number of dictionary types needed in their language programs. Using these results, language advisors may question their curriculum or replicate this study to make more informed decisions about their study plan.

This paper comprises six sections. First, the introduction describes the most relevant information and presents the importance of dictionary exposure and instruction in second or foreign language academic settings. Second, the literature review summarizes the core concepts related to dictionaries and reports some related research. Third, the methods section describes the study design and describes the participants, materials, and procedures present in this paper. Fourth, the results section presents the most significant findings related to the research objective using descriptive statistics. Fifth, the discussion section includes the central results of the study. Finally, the conclusion discusses the main results, describes some possible limitations of the study, and offers perspectives for future work and recommendations based on the results.

## Aims

The main aim of this article is to determine to what extent the use of various types of dictionaries has been appropriately addressed in the BA in English and English Teaching. It also seeks to discover what perception English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students have about the preparation in dictionary instruction at a public Costa Rican university.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, a body of research has addressed dictionary use in language settings (Alhatmi, 2019; Chen, 2016; Knežević et al., 2021; Li, 2019; Takkaç-Tulgar, 2017). Although the literature covers mainly monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, this review will focus on four major themes directly related to the scope of this paper. These themes are the definition of dictionary types, the use of paper and electronic dictionaries, students' dictionary use, and dictionary training. When possible, research on less common dictionary types has been considered.

### Defining Dictionary Types

The development of lexicography has been intertwined with new forms of technology. In this sense, Williams (2003) notes that “the advent of modern computing has revolutionised dictionary making by providing not only databases to allow more efficient handling of data, but also access to new forms of data” (p. 3). Additionally, Schnoor (2003) mentions that since various kinds of dictionaries “list all sorts of things in sometimes varying ways, the information given can be extremely different in one dictionary compared to another” (p. 4). This variety makes dictionary instruction relevant for English Language Learners (ELL), particularly for students pursuing a graduate diploma in English or English teaching.

In general terms, dictionaries are works that “provide information, usually concise definitions, about words or topics” (Gibaldi & Modern Language Association of America, 2009, p. 13). However, for the purposes of this paper, each type of dictionary included is defined as follows:

1. Bilingual dictionary: contains mainly word translations between two languages (Merriam-Webster, 2016a)
2. Collocations dictionary: lists words that usually go together (Benson et al., 2009)
3. Etymological dictionary: lets you trace the origin of a word (Skeat, 2005)
4. Idioms dictionary: allows you to look for idiomatic expressions containing a particular word (Ayto, 2020)
5. Monolingual dictionary: allows you to find the definition of a specific word in a particular language (Merriam-Webster, 2016b)
6. Phrasal verbs dictionary: lists definitions of phrasal (two-word) verbs (McIntosh, 2006)
7. Pronouncing dictionary: transcribes or pronounces a word for you, usually without listing definitions, synonyms, or translations (Kenyon & Knott, 2001)
8. Reverse dictionary: looks for a particular word based on a definition (Donges, 2016)
9. Rhyming dictionary: finds words that sound similar to the word given (Espy & Hargraves, 2006)
10. Slang dictionary: looks for the meaning and use of words in a context regarded as very informal (Spears, 2000)
11. Thesaurus (dictionary): lists synonyms, antonyms, and related terms (Olsen et al., 2014)

This list excludes other types of specialized dictionaries, including medical or legal dictionaries. As previously stated, language programs often leave most of these dictionary types aside. Although there might be other types of dictionaries relevant for students in optional courses, the types stated above are helpful across the core courses of the study plan.

## Print and electronic dictionaries

The pervasive use of the Internet and mobile devices has reshaped how students interact with dictionaries. Current studies appear to support the notion that students prefer electronic dictionaries, and professors have geared toward their gradual inclusion in language learning settings. Electronic dictionaries gained momentum in the early 90s with the expansion of the Internet. At present, electronic dictionaries are more convenient, versatile, and updated for language learners than paper dictionaries (Dziemiánko, 2010; Laufer & Hill, 2000; Tono, 2000).

In discussing electronic dictionaries, Loucky (2010) explored two essential issues. First, the researcher examined 59 Japanese college-level students' opinions about using paper versus electronic dictionaries. It was concluded that a slight majority of students (35.59%) used electronic dictionaries, which included both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. In the case of paper dictionaries, 33.89% of students used bilingual print dictionaries, and 25.42% relied on a monolingual paper dictionary. Only 5.08% had access to an electronic dictionary that included a bilingual dictionary only. These results indicate that an important number of students are already using electronic dictionaries. However, although paper dictionaries are still in use, compared to electronic dictionaries, they can only contain one type per edition, making them less portable compared to electronic dictionaries. In addition, Loucky (2010) mentions that students used electronic dictionaries primarily for English to Japanese translations (30% to 70% of the time) and Japanese to English translations (20% to 30% of the time). Thus, students have welcomed electronic dictionaries and the numerous additional features they offer compared to paper dictionaries.

In general, one of the aspects associated with dictionaries is vocabulary. In the case of electronic dictionaries, words can be easily included or excluded, and their definitions can be modified accordingly and in real-time. In this sense, Zou et al. (2017) explored the effectiveness of electronic and paper dictionaries to acquire vocabulary in ESL settings. Their study included 185 Asian ELLs at a university level. The authors found that "the hybrid uses of paper and electronic dictionaries were significantly more effective than the pure use of either of them" (Zou et al., 2017, p. 391). While working on English vocabulary retention in high school, Chiu & Liu (2013) also found an interesting dichotomy between paper and electronic dictionaries. Although the authors found that electronic dictionaries seem to attract students more, it was also revealed that word retention improves with the use of paper dictionaries compared to electronic dictionaries only. In summary, the authors state that "electronic dictionaries could thus be used as a gateway to arouse students' interest to use dictionaries, while printed dictionaries could be used to help students retain the word forms and meanings" (Chiu & Liu, 2013, p. 619). Therefore, the use of the electronic dictionary does not necessarily replace its printed version.

In a similar study, Trinh et al. (2021) explored the different effects of electronic and paper dictionaries. Their study included 300 ELLs from a Vietnam university. The main results indicate that students value using the dictionary to improve their vocabulary acquisition. Although students prefer online dictionaries, a portion of the population does not disregard paper dictionaries. Despite the frequently contradictory information or the claim that printed dictionaries are superior to electronic dictionaries (Kipfer, 2015), the growing use of electronic dictionaries cannot be denied. Besides the possibility of consulting different dictionary types from a single source, electronic dictionaries offer auditory and visual input and exercises in multimedia format (Nesi, 2003), are less time-consuming to use (Li & Xu, 2015), and show more precisely what students are looking for (Amirian & Heshmatifar, 2013).

## L2 Learners' Dictionary Use

As mentioned before, research on dictionary use usually focuses on vocabulary acquisition. This tendency may reflect a more traditional perspective of what dictionaries, especially digital dictionaries, include. With the advent of digital corpora, new and improved types of dictionaries, such as the collocation dictionary, have become more common in language settings. Yet, they do not seem to gain the same attention as monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Thus, this section explores research conducted, taking into account some less frequently used dictionary types.

Among the many types of dictionaries available to ELLs, the collocations dictionary has gained some popularity in the field of applied linguistics. Fan (2000), for example, explored the look-up behaviors of more than 1,000 university students in Hong Kong. The researcher's main conclusion pointed out that "the dictionary information which was used least often by the students, in general, included the collocation, the pronunciation, the frequency and the appropriate usages of words and, except for collocation, such information was also considered least useful" (Fan, 2000, p. 134). In addition, data also revealed that more proficient students regarded this information as more valuable. Different from vocabulary acquisition, collocation dictionaries offer "advanced ESL learners [...] an easily accessible online resource that gives explicit information about typical lexical and syntactic collocations, especially for production purposes" (McAlpine & Myles, 2003, pp. 75-76). As a result, the dictionary transitions from a source for decoding meaning to a tool for creating content.

A second dictionary type that has increased in popularity is the pronunciation dictionary. In the past, pronunciation dictionaries relied on phonetic alphabets to convey the word's pronunciation. However, not all students are well versed in phonetic transcriptions. Moreover, the number of phonetic alphabets used in different dictionaries made getting the pronunciation of a word more challenging. Pikilnyak et al. (2021) also noted that some electronic dictionaries have videos that aid students in how to pronounce words. The researchers argue that that feature is crucial because "it is the best way to learn the right pronunciation" (Pikilnyak et al., 2021, p. 73). As with other types of dictionaries, this does not mean paper dictionaries should be abandoned. Electronic pronunciation dictionaries also present other flaws, such as "the supposed superior credibility of the 'first' pronunciation" (Marckwardt, 2012, p. 40). However, despite its format, a pronunciation dictionary can only present a limited number of possible pronunciations for a word. Pronunciation dictionaries have proven effective in language learning settings. Kent (2001), for example, argues that "hearing the word aloud also allows for a physical auditory connection with a term, and for EFL students, this provides a method from which they can then drill the pronunciation of previously unknown vocabulary" (p. 87). Metruk (2017) explains that with electronic dictionaries, "English learners can actually see, hear, and model the pronunciation of any word within seconds, when working with electronic and online editions of modern dictionaries" (p. 40). Levy & Steel's (2015) data results also reflect how students value and appreciate complementary tools such as pronunciation features in electronic dictionaries. Students' interests, convenience, and better and enriched input make the pronunciation dictionary essential in any language-learning scenario.

Although much research has been conducted on the use of monolingual, bilingual, and, to a lesser degree, collocation and pronunciation dictionaries, other dictionary types have received less attention to date. Moreover, scant attention has been paid to the reverse, rhyming, or thesaurus dictionaries, to name a few.

## Dictionary Training

Dictionary training may improve and increase the acquisition of various language features, despite the fact that dictionaries in language classes are often taken for granted. Besides, Loucky (2010) noted that students



lack adequate instruction to improve their use of dictionaries. In addition, the author mentions that students need more guidance, familiarization, and awareness of dictionaries to maximize their usefulness substantially.

Another problem arises when students receive contradictory instructions. For example, Prichard (2008) found that dictionary instruction and use varies from class to class. Although some professors encourage students to use dictionaries recurrently, others omit the use of dictionaries entirely. The researcher's study included 34 female university students. Among the main conclusions, data suggest that selective dictionary use can improve reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, and time management. In addition, the author suggests that some learners may encounter selective dictionary use challenging and that teachers sometimes indicate that students do not make proper use of dictionaries. Nevertheless, no concrete steps are given on how to improve this issue.

In a study comprising 14 Japanese undergraduate students, Koyama (2015) explored the use of four e-dictionary strategies: "(1) guessing meanings from the context before actual look-ups; (2) associating dictionary information with their background knowledge; (3) checking usage examples of the target words; and (4) paying attention to pronunciation of the target words and pronouncing them" (p. 39). The main findings suggest that "the dictionary training in reference skills and strategies can be an incentive to form a desirable EFL learning environment" (Koyama, 2015, p. 41). Although different dictionary types may require specific training, having a dictionary use and training culture may improve students' proficiency in all linguistic skills.

Further, other authors have also stressed the importance of dictionary training for ELLs. Miller (2012) mentions that in the case of monolingual English learners' dictionaries, "It is recommended that a lecture on their use be included in any pre-enrolment English programs run by universities and other tertiary education institutions" (p. 49). The author also suggests that advisors familiarize themselves more with the functions dictionaries offer to transmit that knowledge to students. Chan (2005) advocates that dictionary training promotes learning autonomy. The author insists that "organizers of teacher training programmes should also consider including the training of dictionary skills as one of the chief components in their programmes" (p. 19). Finally, Chan (2017) advocates for the incorporation of "a metalinguistic analysis component, where learners are engaged in activities in discovering such differences (or similarities) and the varied functions of dictionary information for encoding and decoding" (p. 202).

The literature review shows that although several dictionary types exist, most research has focused on monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. In addition, a tendency to incorporate the electronic dictionary exists but the importance of the printed dictionaries still lingers in classes. Additionally, students, professors, and language researchers have focused on specific types of dictionaries, such as pronunciation and collocation dictionaries. Still, they have neglected the use of other dictionary types to some extent. Finally, training students on dictionary use has gained importance, and more people are encouraging its inclusion in the language learning curriculum.

## METHOD

### Participants

After visiting several virtual classes of students taking a fourth-year writing course in English as a second language major, a personal electronic mailing list of 55 students willing to participate was created. A total of 48 students answered the survey within the indicated time. Participants were chosen using convenience sampling since they meet the necessary characteristics of the study. The participants were selected since they are about to graduate and have taken all written courses in the program; therefore, they know how dictionary

instruction is addressed in the entire major. The list included every student who agreed to participate in the study. All students speak Spanish as their first language.

## Materials

An electronic, written consent was created and sent to invite students to participate. In addition, a descriptive 16-item survey was employed to determine to what extent the use of various types of dictionaries has been adequately addressed in the B.A. in English and English Teaching. It also sought to discover what perceptions students have regarding this issue. The survey was developed with the help of another professor and pilot-tested with nine students with the same affiliation as the target population. Afterward, it was revised based on the pilot testing. This material also contained a list of the dictionaries under study and a definition for each dictionary type. The list was prepared in case students were unfamiliar with a particular type of dictionary, were perplexed by its name, or were unable to connect the dictionary's name to its function.

Each item on the survey was included in one of the following four sections: a) demographic information, b) dictionary use (according to their knowledge of each type and their use in language courses), c) electronic and paper dictionaries, and d) dictionary instruction. The survey used two question formats: forced-choice and at least one open-ended question. Some of the forced-choice questions allowed students to come up with their own answers. The survey included mainly attitudinal and knowledge questions. Most items were presented as checklists or Likert scales. For example, some items asked the participants to rate how good or poor dictionary instruction had been during their major. These items were placed on a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (Poor) to 5 (Excellent). This type of scale format, or a similar one, was also used for other items in the survey.

The last part of the survey contained one open-ended question. This question invited participants to comment on dictionary instruction they believed necessary. The total time to complete the survey was estimated at 8 to 10 minutes.

## Procedure

This study used a quantitative, direct needs assessment, survey-based study design. Students' opinions were collected using an electronic survey. Results were analyzed using descriptive statistics. The survey was revised by another university professor and pilot tested with nine students who were not part of the study but had a similar academic level and age range as the target population. The survey sought to answer two main questions: 1. What types of dictionaries have been appropriately implemented in the BA in English and English Teaching? 2. What perception do EFL students have about the preparation in dictionary instruction in their major? Since the study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the researcher requested students to participate, and they were briefed on the study's purpose via Zoom. Then, all students were given a link to provide their email if they were interested in participating in the study. In the first email, students were invited to participate and were given written consent. The researcher instructed them to read it and ask any necessary questions. To complete the survey, all students had to indicate if they had read the consent and were willing to participate. The first electronic mailing was sent to all 55 participants and included a digital copy of the consent.

A total of three electronic mails were sent. Each email encouraged students to participate and thanked those who had already answered the survey. Before the survey was closed, 48 students had completed it.



## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The following description and analysis describe students' perceptions towards dictionary use in the B.A. in English and the B.A. in English Teaching. Of the 48 students who answered the survey, 36 (75%) were females, and 12 were males (25%). Overall, 32 students (72.9%) reported their age as being between 18 and 24, while ten students (28.8%) belonged to the 25 to 34 age range. Two students (4.2%) were between 35 and 44. Only one student (2.1%) was over 45. The majority of the students ( $n = 47$ , 97.9%) asserted that English was their second language. Only one person described English as their first language ( $n = 1$ , 2.1%). In terms of studies, 38 students (79.2%) were enrolled in the B.A. in English, eight (16.7%) in English Teaching, and two (4.2%) in both majors. All students were taking the last courses of the study block (fourth year, eighth semester).

When asked about what dictionary types they knew, students ranked the bilingual, thesaurus, and monolingual dictionaries as the ones they knew best (see Figure 1). These results reflect what was found in the review of the literature. Except for the thesaurus, the five most common dictionaries in the literature review are the same ones chosen by students. On the other hand, the rhyming, reverse, and phrasal verb dictionaries are the least known. Of the 11 dictionary types selected for this study, six (54.5%) fall under 50% in terms of student experience with them. Percentages of the first three figures do not add up to 100% since students could choose all the options that applied.

FIGURE 1

### Students' knowledge about dictionary types

Source: Compiled by the author based on data gathered through students' answers.

In terms of what dictionaries students have used in the core courses of their major, the results are very similar. Students rated the bilingual, thesaurus, and monolingual dictionaries as the most useful ones (see Figure 2). As can be expected, all dictionaries showed a minor decrease on average. The only exception was the thesaurus. This increase may be caused by some students using the thesaurus without knowing that this was a particular dictionary or because they just started using the dictionary in their final semester, thus not knowing about this dictionary type before.

FIGURE 2

### Students' use of dictionary types in the core courses

Source: Compiled by the author based on data gathered through students' answers.

Some contrast becomes evident among professors' dictionary recommendations (see Figure 3). Results show that professors do not recommend dictionary types as much as students know or use them. On the other hand, students' answers show that some dictionary types, such as bilingual or slang dictionaries, are not as recommended as the reported use and knowledge students have about them. Finally, although professors recommend using the collocation dictionary, some students do not see the importance of using it.

FIGURE 3

### Professors' dictionary type recommendations

Source: Compiled by the author based on data gathered through students' answers.

When describing how frequently they use each dictionary type (see Table 1), students again ranked the thesaurus, monolingual, and bilingual dictionaries as the most frequently used ones. Overall results demonstrated that the etymological, reverse, and rhyming dictionaries are rarely used. Regarding the course category in which students believe each dictionary type should be directly addressed, four dictionary types

were found to be more suitable for writing courses, three for oral courses, two for grammar courses, and only one for literature courses. According to the responses gathered, the reverse dictionary should not be taught as a first option in any course. A second relevant option to expose students to dictionary types would be literature courses with five mentions, followed by oral, writing, and grammar courses with one mention each.

TABLE 1  
Dictionary use mean, standard deviation, and specific courses

Type of Dictionary	$\bar{X}$	SD	Core Course(s)
Monolingual	3.80	1.42	Writing (Literature)
Thesaurus	3.77	1.31	Writing (Oral)
Bilingual	3.47	1.40	Writing (Literature)
Pronouncing	3.31	1.68	Oral (-)
Collocations	2.04	1.15	Writing (Grammar)
Idioms	1.76	0.97	Oral (Literature)
Phrasal	1.68	1.01	Grammar (Writing)
Slang	1.67	0.90	Oral (Literature)
Etymological	1.43	0.73	Grammar (Literature)
Reverse	1.23	0.71	None (Writing)
Rhyming	1.07	0.26	Literature (Oral)

Source: compiled by the author based on survey responses.

**Note.** N = 48. X# = arithmetic mean; SD = Standard Deviation. The values corresponding to Core Course(s) indicate the courses where students believe instruction or exposure of a given dictionary should occur. The courses in parenthesis show a second option for instruction or exposure.

The relevance of the electronic dictionary compared to the printed dictionary is considerable. A great majority of students (n=44, 91.7%) prefer the electronic dictionary. Among the reasons for preferring electronic dictionaries, students mention practicality (n=31, 70.5%) as the most important reason. Other secondary reasons are: updated information (n=4, 9.1%), amount of information (n=3, 6.8%), and price (n=3, 6.8%). Only four students (8.3%) favor using the paper dictionary. In this case, only two reasons were mentioned: reliability (n=2, 50%) and practicality (n=2, 50%).

When asked if professors have restricted paper or electronic dictionaries, 28 (58.3%) students indicate that they do. According to 16 (33.3%), there have been no restrictions, and four students (8.3%) are unsure. Those who argue that a limitation has taken place identified the electronic dictionary (n=23, 82.1%) as the most restricted one. Five students (17.9%) report that both dictionary formats have been equally regulated.

According to students' opinions, dictionary training or exposure is deficient (see Figure 4). On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being poor and 5 being excellent, most students (n=20, 41.7%) assigned a two to this section. The second most ranked category was a three (n=15, 31.3%), a midway point between poor and excellent. The rest of the distribution remained almost parallel between an acceptable four or five and complete dissatisfaction with the instruction or exposure received.

FIGURE 4

## Quality of dictionary instruction or exposure

Source: Compiled by the author based on data gathered through students' answers.

In contrast, 21 students (43.8%) categorized dictionary instruction or exposure as necessary, and 21 students (43.8%) considered it as very necessary. Only six students rated it as somewhat necessary or not necessary (see Figure 5).

FIGURE 5

## Importance of dictionary instruction or exposure

Source: Compiled by the author based on data gathered through students' answers.

Although results presented in Figure 5 show an evident tendency towards the inclusion of dictionary instruction in the language program, exposure and training remain factors that students recognize as necessary; however, this has been often overlooked in the core language courses of the major.

## Limitations and Future Directions

This study has three notable limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the study focused on a B.A. in English and a B.A. in English Teaching, where students learn the language and learn about the language. The syllabi concentrate on pronunciation, writing, grammar, and literature in order of importance. Although the approach shares some communicative principles, it follows a more academic style where students present speeches, write essays, and analyze grammar structures and literary works. Therefore, the results presented here might not be suitable for other programs that focus on general English or English for occupational purposes, to name a few.

Second, the kind of previous exposure that students received may have interfered with some of the results. In this study, the thesaurus, for example, seems to have been recommended extensively by professors and used prolifically by students. This exposure may have influenced the frequency of use and the students' overall positive opinions about the dictionary. Similarly, the phrasal verb dictionary ranked relatively low in knowledge, use, and professors' recommendations. However, this does not imply that any type of dictionary, in general, is better than another type.

Finally, the study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. This situation may have affected how students view the paper and the electronic dictionary. Moreover, in a regular setting, students could have been given a chance to use a paper dictionary, or they could have borrowed one from the local library. Nonetheless, the virtual environment may have made the electronic version more practical since students were already using the computer for classwork.

Researchers should replicate this study in other language programs and according to students' specific needs to overcome these limitations. Also, by analyzing these results, stakeholders and language program experts should expose students to various dictionary types equally and then measure students' dictionary use, preferences, and possible outcomes. Additionally, exposing students to various dictionary types may help students with different needs, ways of learning, ways of representing information mentally, and different levels of proficiency. Lastly, future research may address this issue in face-to-face contexts where students do not necessarily have the possibility of accessing the dictionary combined with their daily work.

Further research should be undertaken to determine the impact of including dictionary types in language programs, particularly on specific linguistic skills. Also, the professors' opinions should be explored in-depth since their reasons for not including dictionary exposure or instruction are not well documented. As

mentioned by Prichard (2008), professors are not consistent when recommending dictionaries. These data could trigger a better curricular reform in applied linguistics. A last line of research should address other specialized dictionaries used in specific language fields (e.g., translation). Finally, the results presented in this study should serve to motivate professionals in charge of the curriculum to consider the necessity to include dictionary instruction as a component of language courses throughout the major. In this sense, and based on these results, dictionaries should be allocated depending on what language skill they would benefit the most.

## CONCLUSIONS

In light of the data analyzed, some conclusions can be drawn from this study. First, students reported having adequate knowledge of dictionary types. However, considering the objectives students should accomplish in the majors, some dictionaries, e.g., the collocations and the pronunciation dictionaries, are unknown to about half of the population. Data revealed that students have limited exposure (50%) to six dictionary types (54.5%). As pointed out before, Williams (2003) and Schnoor (2003) have noted how data present in dictionaries has become more varied and vast compared to the advent of modern computing. For example, considering how difficult phrasal verbs are for Spanish speakers and how commonly used they are in English, not knowing about phrasal verb dictionaries and how to use them puts language learners at a significant disadvantage. Conversely, other dictionaries do not seem to be a component of students' linguistic toolboxes. Similar results are obtained from the students' use of dictionary types, indicating that professors only include some dictionary types in their instruction, for example, the bilingual dictionary (n=39, 81.3%), the monolingual dictionary (n=35, 72.9%), and the thesaurus (n=42, 87.5%). In addition, the programs, materials, and activities recommended in the course program also seem to omit their use. Therefore, an appropriate course of action would be to consider the results presented here and incorporate dictionary instruction along with the study plan and the specific academic strand (oral, writing, grammar, or literature courses).

Second, consistent with Loucky (2010), Trinh et al. (2021), and Chiu & Liu (2013), students show a marked preference for electronic dictionaries (n=44, 91.7%). With the advent of mobile devices and improving internet connections, the electronic dictionary has become a staple for language learners (Dziemianko, 2010; Laufer & Hill, 2000; Tono, 2000). Especially during the pandemic, students have experienced electronic activities and materials like never before. As students mention, the electronic dictionary is more practical. It allows students to search faster and in various dictionaries, without the inconveniences that paper dictionaries may have. Students also value the quantity and quality of information available there. Although the paper dictionary may still have its place (in the case of evaluations or other activities where students may get distracted by using their phones), the curriculum should address electronic dictionaries over paper dictionaries. Students should not only know that several dictionary types and formats exist, but professors should guide them to appropriately discern which dictionaries may be trusted or are more reliable.

Third, to instill the proper use of dictionary types, faculty must agree on what is more beneficial for students. Zou et al. (2017), for example, have suggested the use of paper and electronic dictionaries alike. Students should also become familiar, if they are not already, with the options available. Also, they should distribute dictionary instruction along with the curriculum to avoid overloading students with information. In addition, instructors should reach a consensus about dictionary use during classwork. Although it is unclear why professors forbid the use of specific dictionaries or their use during certain activities, these policies should be revised. In so doing, students would understand that an agreement exists and that dictionary use merits attention.

Finally, exposure and instruction should be a consistent and structured component of language courses. Students clearly acknowledge their usefulness. Data revealed that 21 students (43.8%) consider dictionary

instruction or exposure as necessary, while 21 students (43.8%) considered it as very necessary, yet an important number of students (n=26, 54.2%) consider that the quality of exposure is either absent or may be delayed in the major. As previously mentioned, it is not advisable to leave this decision to individual professors. Instead, policymakers should involve faculty and students to decide what should be included, when it should be included, and how dictionary instruction should be carried out. Dictionaries serve to improve students knowledge about the language in various ways. In an EFL major, where students need to learn the language and develop their metalanguage at the same time, dictionaries become more relevant than in general language courses. Since students study language macro and micro skills, knowing about and using different kinds of dictionaries provides an advantage and promotes independent learning. Moreover, although students can benefit from using dictionaries since their first courses, some dictionaries may be introduced later in the academic program and may be better tailored to some specific courses, as indicated in the analysis of the results.

The researcher invites other language teaching institutions to replicate this study. At their core, EFL and ESL programs should stress students' needs. Proper dictionary instruction makes students more independent learners, helps them learn directly and indirectly, and improves their language skills. It also provides students with tools to perform better in the future and continue their never-ending learning process.

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## APPENDIX 1: Dictionary Use

### I. Demographic Information

The University of Costa Rica does not discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity/ expression, age, or national origin. In order to track the reach and effectiveness of our learning experiences and ensure we consider the needs of all, please consider the following questions:

1. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Non-binary / third gender

Prefer to self-describe: \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to say

2. What is your age?

Below 18

18 – 24

25 – 34

35 – 44

45 – 54

Above 54

3. What is your native language?

English