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## *An Enquiry into ESL Learners' Perceptions and Preferences for Paperback or Digital Dictionary at Graduate Level in the South Punjab*

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### **Abstract**

This paper investigates empirically the changing attitude of ESL learners towards the use of dictionaries be that paperback or digital. Mix-methods approach was used and responses were collected through a questionnaire administered on 150 ESL learners of English from five distinguished institutions of the South Punjab. Employing the data triangulation technique, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview from the selected learners as well as book sellers for validity. Keeping in view the findings of past studies of the kind, the researchers found out that there is enormously higher reliance on online dictionaries rather than paperback dictionaries but students' reference skills are rather poor due to insufficient learning of dictionary skills. Students are more inclined towards looking up meaning and thus prefer using online monolingual dictionaries because of convenience and easy access to meaning by virtue of availability of android cellular phones. This study further proposes the need for affording courses in dictionary skills for capitalizing the dictionary potentials more particularly of paperback



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dictionary. The available online dictionaries are further required to be studied from the perspective of ESL learners' needs.

**Keywords:** ESL learner, monolingual dictionary, reference skills and online dictionary

## **1. Introduction**

Language learning is one of the most preferred agenda of people. In the field of research, the most investigated and discussed tool of language learning is dictionary. As a requisite source to encourage the individual learning or self-directed learning (Bishop, 2000; Chan, 2011), significance of dictionaries cannot be overlooked since they make language learners able to develop certain language techniques more specifically relevant to pronunciation, grammar, etymology and register with jargons besides providing the meaning of the searched lexical item. Studies on the use of various dictionary types have pointed at the advantages of dictionary use compared to no dictionary use (Chen, 2011; Hyun Ma & Chen, 2016).

Rapid digitalization and globalization has also impacted the preference of dictionary users. It is inevitable that the online and offline dictionary use has grab the attention of researchers, as they are interested in problems impinging language learning and lexicography. Considerable sophistication is required for learning from a dictionary at the present time for say interrupting your reading to research an unfamiliar lexeme in an alphabetical list, all the while keeping the original context in focus so that you may draw a comparison of it with the alternative mentioned in the dictionary, and then as high-level cognitive task, we select the sense that is most appropriate in the original context (Miller & Gildea 1987: 97).

The quest to acquire the English language has made the Pakistani ESL learners, for a good reason, get privileged by learning new vocabulary and its usage by using dictionaries. This study aims at gauging the attitude of Pakistani ESL learners at graduate level toward the dictionary choice and their ability to use dictionaries to optimal level possible. It is a concern related to the preference of students to online or offline dictionaries and a study to explore how paperback dictionaries at present have been going under the sway of online dictionaries.

### **1.1 Statement of Problem**

According to Stein (2002), without noting the user, his needs, his expectations, and his prejudices, no account of thesaurus is complete. The issue remains valid as studies have to be conducted to find out what attitudes Pakistani ESL students have towards the use of paper dictionaries. In the world of technology what will they prefer either Paper Dictionaries (PD) or Software Dictionaries (SD). The answer quite naturally points to the latter but assessing prospecting learners' needs remains an unfinished part of the case. ESL learners in this part of the world are required to be involved for their valuable input as to what kind of dictionary caters to the specific needs. The study further seeks to explore how paper dictionaries can provide better opportunities to develop and enhance proficiency in learning a second/foreign language through being cognizant of modern lexicographic practices and to acquire knowledge of reference skills to exploit potentials offered by reference work like a dictionary.

### **1.2 Objectives**

The use of dictionaries varies from learner to learner and their level of learning a second language as reference works, today, are compiled taking primarily the needs of prospective users of dictionary. The way ESL students use dictionaries in learning the English language outside the classroom or in the absence of teachers. Dictionary use under the given situation assumes greater importance and it is the basic objective of the present study. The focused area of this study includes the following:

- a. To explore ESL learners' attitude towards using dictionaries.
- b. To find out students' preference of online dictionaries to paperback dictionaries.
- c. To gauge students' proficiency while using paperback dictionaries.
- d. To explore how far the online dictionaries are having a sway on the use of paperback dictionaries.

### **1.3 Research questions**

Main research questions in this study are as follows:

- i) What is the ESL learners' most preferred dictionary (Paperback or digital) at graduate level in the South Punjab?
- ii) Why do ESL learners prefer using online dictionaries to paperback dictionaries?
- iii) How far are paperback dictionaries advantageous over online dictionaries?

## **2. Literature Review**

Dictionary use by language learners has been studied from various perspectives in the past few years. To explore the attitude of Pakistani ESL learner at present, we did some research on past studies and compared them with current finding of our explorations for better understanding and vast views.

Mansoor-ul-Haq and Ahmad (2010) investigated dictionary using habits of MBBS students. According to study, with the quantitative method of analysis in nature, targeted 100 MBBS students studying at Sharif Medical College, Lahore as elected sample of the study. These students were administered a questionnaire adapted from Hartmann (1999), Nesi (2000), Tono (2001) and Ahmad (2009). The analysis disclosed that the medical students least use the dictionary for language base issues. They do not intend to search out definitions, grammatical usages, pronunciations, and phrasal verbs. On the contrary, dictionaries are being used to search out the encyclopedic information by the students of medical science. The results of study shows that the medical students do not pay attention to their language needs. They use dictionaries just as a gadget of extra knowledge and medical language base information.

Ali (2012) investigated students' attitude towards actual utilization of pedagogical dictionaries. The subject of this research was Monolingual Dictionary applications in an ESL Context while population included Caledonian College of Engineering, Oman. A sample of 20 teachers and 100 students out of total population ranging from (18-22 years) and have many things in common such as linguistic background, culture, schooling etc. was chosen. The study, being exploratory in nature, employed quantitative research method technique using questionnaires and findings of this study revealed that teachers in this study are in favor of using monolingual dictionaries. However, the students generally prefer to use bilingual dictionaries. A comparative debate between the dictionaries usage and contextual guessing was done by Huang and Eslami (2013). The subjects of study were 100 participants (53 males and 47 females) of southwestern US University with their divergent linguistic backgrounds: Chinese

(Mandarin), Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, Turkish, and Indonesian. Questionnaires were filled on the campus library. The results revealed that students use dictionaries most of the time to explore the exact word pronunciation and unfamiliar word's information. They were least concerned the dictionaries for prevalence of use and appropriate usage of an unfamiliar word. They approach the dictionary only for decoding and accuracy of pronunciation of the words in English. Siddiek & Ali Elsayed (2015) investigated students' attitude towards actual use of pedagogical dictionaries. The main motifs of this study were majors of English as a language while population included four Sudanese universities, especially Sudan University of Science and Technology, Al Neelein University, University of Khartoum, and Omdurman Islamic University during the academic year 2012- 2013. A sample of 160 students was chosen out of total population of 1496. Mixed method technique was employed in this research, the data was collected using questionnaire, and then responses were further investigated through informal interviews. The statistical quantities revealed that there is a believe that monolingual English dictionaries are the best and customary choice among an overwhelming majority of the students. Moreover, a great strength of students expect dictionaries to be an indivisible part of their language course.

Wolter (2015) investigated the utilization and opinions of ESL students about dictionaries as well as the training they practiced in their classes having relevance to dictionaries. Through four parts, including observation, interviews, and questionnaires data was gathered and organized. The results demonstrated that, student participants reported an overwhelmingly dependence on online dictionaries while they used a combination of book and online dictionaries and same time. The participants also were selective in the information they used from dictionaries, frequently including only information about definition and examples in their book exercises and glossaries.

Alhaisoni (2016) also investigated students' and teachers' attitude towards actual applications and utilization of pedagogical dictionaries. ESL Teachers' and Students' Perception of dictionary use and preferences is the statement of problem in this research. And population included is the students of University of Ha'il, Ha'il from Saudi Arabia. Participants were 99 in number out of which some were male and some were female teachers as well as 3993(1815 male and 2178 female) students and were invited to answer the questionnaires. As mixed-methods approach was adopted and 40 students participated in the conducted interview session, an extensive overview of the dictionary use was taken. The study indicated that students highly preferred bilingual dictionaries to the other kinds of dictionaries and they also prefer to use their dictionaries for

meanings of words and their spellings, ignoring the other features such as pronunciation with illustrated examples, and collocations.

Similarly, Tulgar (2017) demonstrated the means undergraduate students of foreign language departments in Turkey, used both paperback and online dictionaries. The study as such was a qualitative research done by utilizing the classroom observations and interviews of semi structured in nature for data collection as research method tools. Participant of this research were a class of Turkish-English Translation course comprised of 71 students. They interviewed the 12 participants who were noted to overwhelmingly use dictionaries and to get advantages from both paperback and online dictionaries. Semi-structured interviews (each of 20 minutes) and observation highlighted that student use online dictionaries practically because they are accessed readily within short time but they did not negate the importance of paper dictionaries because of serendipity, participants get by using them.

In most recent works, Din (2019) got insights into the expectants of using cellular-phone dictionary in an EFL classroom of university students of Pakistan with reference to the thinking and views of teachers. This study was quantitative in nature and the researcher used questionnaire as data collection tool and then got it filled by fifty English language tutors teaching at various government colleges in Pakistan. The reliability of the questionnaires was computed through SPSS (XX). The results showed that opinions of most of the college teachers are that the use of cellular-phone dictionary in an EFL class of university students will benefit them learn lexemes, pronunciation of these lexemes and word history. Authentic content can be accessed and language competence can be enhanced with cellular-phone dictionary in the class by these EFL learners. In addition to this, the participants have also pin point some issues which can be a hindrance in using cellular-phone dictionary in an EFL classroom in the context of Pakistan.

Moreover, Maden (2020) conducted a survey at a middle school in order to find out the attitude of students towards using printed or online dictionaries. Students, studying at a middle school in Giresun Province Urban Center during the 2018-2019 academic years, were selected as population and for sampling random method were implied. The findings demonstrated that gender did not have any particular effect on the attitude of dictionary utilization habits. The most significant points in this study included the betterment of student behavior towards dictionary use with the promotion in grade level, and when compared to other students, the dictionary use attitudes of those students who had been using the printed dictionaries since primary school or before were higher in

number. However, the attitude towards digital dictionary use was noted as a progressing attitude.

### **3. Methodology**

This study aimed to explore the attitude of ESL students towards the preference of dictionary kind whether paperback or digital ones. It is a descriptive as well as analytical study where mixed method approach was adopted during the conduct of research as both qualitative and quantitative methods were implied in data collection and analysis.

#### **3.1 Population and Sampling**

This research has been carried out in some universities situated at Bosan road, Multan, Pakistan. Out of this large population a sample of 150 graduates in BS-English 4 Year program was selected from Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan, Emerson University, Multan, University of Central Punjab Multan Campus, Institute of Southern Punjab, Emerson University, Multan and Govt. Graduate College of Science, Multan respectively. Random selection method was used for this purpose. In order to check the attitude of students towards use of paperback dictionary, a questionnaire was administered to the students from BS English class of the selected institutions for the reason that students from the length and breadth of the whole South Punjab are enrolled there and thus it becomes a representative sample. The respondents included both male and female learners of age group ranging from 20 to 25. In addition to this, interviews with ESL learners as well as noted booksellers were conducted in order to get a vivid idea about the attitude of people towards purchasing dictionaries. Triangulation of data through the aforesaid tool was done with a view to ensuring the question of validity and reliability of the present study. Data thus gathered was later on subjected to statistical analysis and results were gathered and presented in graphical forms to generate some findings and conclusions.

### **4. Data Analysis**

The study as such was carried out to gauge the state of dictionary use among the ESL learners in this part of the world where English assumed the status of official language. As a privileged language in diverse fields of activity, this language is taught as an obligatory course from primary to tertiary level and its significance in higher learning levels and stages cannot be over exaggerated. Dictionary is generally seen as an essential

language learning aid when learners are outside the classroom or without any recourse to language teachers. By their very nature, dictionaries rightly thought to be authentic records on various aspects of language. The learners were accessed after formal permission from the institutional heads and were briefed about the nature, purpose and ethical issues therein. The questionnaire contained two parts, the first contained biographical information, linguistic background and past academic record whereas the second part was more specifically concerned with dictionary related input like possession of dictionary, dictionary using training, dictionary structure awareness, linguistic knowledge in entry section, learners' most desired element of dictionary consultation and actual instances of dictionary use among the respondents.

According to the results of the current research, ratio of paperback dictionary users is quite lower as compared to those using online dictionary. As ESL learners are targeted population so the use of dictionary is relatively higher for vocabulary, grammar, sense relations and other lexical features of lexemes. Most of the time paperback dictionaries are not preference among ESL learners, unless there is a quite sensible, delicate and more detailed information or research is required related to the lexical items of English language. So, it can be claimed that paperback dictionary is an authentic source in the retention of meaning and collocation and other. ESL learners rely on paperback dictionary when need to know he authentic as well as the most valid information with the exact references and credibility. Paperback dictionaries also got privileged because they contain a handsome amount of information and detailed data about each and every word present in the dictionary. On contrary to this, online dictionaries are thought be less reliable and mediocre in quality to paperback dictionaries for having less explicit and authentic information.

In spite of all disadvantages of online dictionaries, they are still some at points considered beneficial like being portable and convenient to use. Furthermore they give the opportunity to listen how the words can be pronounced if one cannot transcribe the words. Last but the not least is the time taken by online word research is in seconds that help the learners to avoid flipping pages back and forth in search of required information and wastage of time.



**Table 1**

S. No.	Use of dictionary	Yes	No	Total	Percentage
1)	Do learners have dictionary?	38	5	43	88.4%
2)	Use of paperback dictionary	10	33	43	23.3%
3)	Use of monolingual dictionary	28	15	43	65.1%
4)	Having updated version of dictionary	22	21	43	51.2%
5)	Knowledge about proper use of dictionary	34	9	43	79.1%
6)	Get motivation from teachers to use dictionary	30	13	43	69.8%
7)	Mobile dictionary is preferred because of portability, accessibility and cost free.	22	21	43	51.2%
8)	Mobile dictionaries are easy to use	32	11	43	74.4%

## **5. Discussion**

So far as the questionnaire is concerned, it was conducted online and out of total population of 150 only 22 learners reported to be having paperback dictionaries and out of these 22 learners 15 were female and 07 were male students. The response to possessing paperback dictionary is self-explanatory as the users of paperback dictionary constitute only 14.66% of the whole population. 128 respondents were in favor of the digital/online dictionary and when they were asked about the name and version of the online dictionaries majority of the respondents drew blank. In the questionnaire, respondents were particularly asked whether they use dictionaries or not, 38 students out of 150 participants responded in affirmative though all of them initially claimed to

be using dictionaries in the previous question. The respondents were of the view that they use dictionary when they do not have any access to their teachers or senior colleagues. Students claimed to be aware of the use of dictionaries and it is also observed from the survey that this motivation to use dictionary for language learning basically comes from their teachers. Moreover, most of the participants prefer to use monolingual and online dictionaries so this result shows that there is a decline towards the use of paperback dictionaries. At the same time, preference of monolingual dictionaries over bilingual dictionaries is a good thing as it helps in language learning positively. It is evident from the survey that students prefer online dictionaries because in their view such dictionaries are portable, easy to use and above all free of cost and easily accessible. On the contrary, fewer students who use paperback dictionaries do not go for online ones as they know that paperback dictionaries are an authentic and more reliable source of getting information than any other resource. Additionally, the semi-formal interviews revealed that a minority of students purchase dictionaries nearly one or two in a year and also the learners do not bother to update their dictionary with the most recently published one. Moreover, from the interview, certain reasons of not paying much attention towards paperback dictionaries also came into view that are; the advancement in technology, lack of motivation and proper guidance among students and above all the huge size of such dictionaries also demotivate students. In the same way, those who consult online dictionaries are not free of worries; they also face many difficulties while consulting online dictionaries as these are not valid enough to provide students with satisfactory results. On the other hand, those who consult paper dictionaries are free of these problems as paper bag dictionaries are corpus based.

## **6. Findings**

As we started this research with these principal questions:

- a. What is the ESL learners' most preferred dictionary (Paperback or digital) at Graduate level in the South Punjab?
- b. Do the learners of English language prefer using online dictionaries or paperback dictionaries?
- c. How far are paperback dictionaries advantageous over online dictionaries?

As far as question 1 is concerned, the analysis of the study revealed student's attitude towards actual reliance on pedagogical dictionaries in language classrooms in a Pakistani context. The behavior of Pakistani students showed distinction with reference to their field. The studies revealed that the attitude of ESL learners differ with respect to other students like medical students, discussed in literature review, as other students has least depend on the dictionary for language learning and usage. The reason could be the lack or absence of required training to tackle the problems related to dictionary utilization for leaning purposes, no inspirational lectures by teachers, less tendencies in the curriculum to involve language students to use dictionary for problems of language, and possibly many other factors as in dictionaries, students show tendencies to get and explore semantic information. They do not bother to other linguistic information related to words like pronunciation, spellings, grammar, origin and history of words, and other related information. So, the study manifests that general-purpose dictionary usage is almost absent in professional courses and degrees like medical science. On the other hand, ESL learners are keen on their dictionary usage and consult dictionary for every aspect of language (pronunciation, spellings, grammar, origin, history of words, and other related points for word use in context) unlike the medical students.

Moreover, with respect to question 2, the results of our past study and current survey revealed that the students prefer using monolingual dictionaries to bilingual dictionaries as they help more to enrich the vocabulary of the target language and give detailed information about the usage of that word in the target language. This behavior in students indicates their perception about contextual knowledge and cultural differences. They know that the meaning of any word cannot be comprehended without knowing the context as well as the cultural use of that word. On the contrary, bilingual dictionaries prevent learners from thinking in the target language, so they start to translate more and more instead of trying to understand the world from the given context, or finding out the definition in the same language.

On the other hand, in reference to the last question, the study also sheds light on use of online dictionaries and paperback dictionaries. The participants of this research mainly used online dictionaries to look up depiction, kinds of word, syntactic use and pronunciation. Results insight that students prefer digital dictionaries to paperback dictionaries and the reason involves various factors like their portability, rate, and diverse factors and features, as they are available in any language with a single click. So, with the smart technical skill of modern college-aged English language students and their common possession on their mobile phones with extraordinary grip on them and

look up capabilities, it, obviously, makes sense that learners more inclined towards a comfortable means in the form of these devices to get easy approach and access.

But, irrespective of online dictionary usage, we have also taken opinions of students through questionnaire and interviews and their results revealed that although the students prefer to use online dictionaries yet they face many difficulties while consulting online dictionaries. Majority of participants voiced out their concern in accessing through electronic dictionaries due to limited internet access. Apart from this, participants stated that they often encounter incomplete definition of words and insufficient information while using online dictionaries. On the other hand, those who were possessing paperback dictionaries are free of these problems as paperback dictionaries are corpus based and provide more valid and relevant information to the students.

Therefore, this study also sensitized us with the need of being cognizant of referencing skills with reference to using a paperback dictionary. The book sellers also expressed the same view that without having ample training in reference skills, the dictionary consultation via the media of paper seems quite hazardous. The paperback dictionary, as per their opinion, are bulky as they contain more than what prospective users desire to learn. Lexicographic research in this particular area of gauging ESL learners' needs in this part of the world is the need of the hour. It is recommended that teachers must find and take necessary steps to make the use of paperback dictionaries common among ESL Pakistani Learners. Furthermore, courses should be arranged and introduced to teach the students that how to read from paper dictionaries. There must be some contribution of teachers to find the ways of motivating students for paperback dictionary usage.

## **7. Conclusion**

The study is a significant contribution to lexicographic research in typical Pakistani context in general and dictionary preference among ESL learners in the South Punjab in particular. ESL learners in this part of the world are now more inclined towards the use of dictionaries for second language acquisition and the dictionaries they use are i) paperback dictionary and ii) online dictionary. The very purpose to find out the attitude of Pakistani ESL learners toward the paperback dictionary is to generate a holistic view of the second language acquisition in the lexicographic perspective. The study provides us with an awareness where the language learning system of our country stand what

betterment we may effect through imparting better learning and training in dictionary related skills like preferred dictionary type whether bilingual or monolingual, dictionary structures, comprehensive semantic knowledge, various senses, inflection, derivate and more significantly complex lexical structures such as phrase and idioms. Inferences claim that although the aptitude is less towards the paperback dictionaries yet those who rely upon it have more mettle about their targets and more confident about their vocabulary comprehension and application. Despite using online dictionaries, they are not satisfied, as they do not have sound empirical basis like meaning discrimination and verbal illustrations. Most of the available online dictionaries are reported to be abridged or outdated versions which render them less effective in ESL context. So, from the above study we can easily conclude that paperback dictionary is far better than online dictionary, due to its being corpus-based, students hours of attention to dictionary consultation, which results in excessive information processing, thus helping to retain a handsome amount of vocabulary and its usage which explain the superiority of paper back dictionary to electronic dictionary.

Furthermore, this study determines the students' attitude towards development in the usage of pedagogical dictionaries from different perspectives that shows the participants are interested mainly get the appropriate definitions with examples for lexical items in their look up with their target language. So, they were more inclined towards the use of monolingual dictionaries because bilingual dictionaries create mess and students do not extract proper information based on relevant word used in their target language.

For language learners to develop a desirable level of proficiency among ESL learners in this part of the world, it is very useful to understand what a word means, which helps them to use it productively. That is why they were less likely to use ample words and its different usage in different languages to avoid ambiguity and confusion. As being capable in using words according to context in comprehensible manner with accurate grammatical sense has also become significantly important, so ESL learners must have proper knowledge about the use of words in their target language appropriately and to meet this target monolingual dictionaries have been proved more beneficial for them. In a word, paperback dictionaries in monolingual versions are more credible and plausible but are reckoned redundant as reflected from their use on the part of ESL Pakistani learners. In view of hectic learning techniques and insufficient teaching and training imparted to ESL learners in Pakistani educational system, it seems most desirable to initiate courses in dictionary referencing skills to exploit the maximum potential out of the available dictionaries be that paperback or the online ones.

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