THE USE OF DICTIONARIES OF THAI EFL LEARNERS IN ENGLISH READING TEXTS

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Abstract:

This research study aimed at investigating the tools Thai EFL learners applied while reading texts in English. The tools investigated consisted of the following print dictionaries: English-Thai, Thai-English, and English-English; the electronic ones included on-line resources or translation application/programs and the talking dictionary. The research participants consisted of 135 English major students drawn from three Thai public universities. Based on their score of a reading proficiency test, the participants were classified into the three proficiency levels: high, intermediate and low. The findings of this study revealed that overall the participants preferred to use both electronic dictionaries and print dictionaries. Regarding print dictionaries, it seemed that the intermediate proficiency group and the low proficiency group preferred to use the two-language dictionaries at a higher degree and the one-language dictionaries at a lower degree than the high proficiency group. As suggested by the results of this study, the choice of dictionaries might affect learners' exposure to the target language. Therefore, the instruction or training in how to choose a suitable dictionary should be taken into account in the English language learning.

Keywords: dictionary, Thai EFL learners, reading, English texts

1. Introduction

Dictionaries are considered to be very useful language learning tools, acting as indispensable sources to promote self-directed learning and enable learners to develop language skills (Bishop, 2000; Chan, 2011). In the process of English learning, a high-quality dictionary is a learner's good friend and teacher (Li & Lou, 2012). On top of the meaning of unknown words, dictionaries allow learners to check pronunciation and spelling. Additionally, some dictionaries may also provide examples of an unknown

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word in phrases and/or sentences so that leaners get an idea of how they can use the word (Harmer, 2001; Nation 2008).

As crucial self-learning tools, dictionaries can be classified into different types considering their language basis and design. Regarding the language basis, there are monolingual dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries. The former presents the explanations in the target language while the latter provides explanations in native-to-target or target-to-native languages. Taking their designs into account, there are print dictionaries in hard copy forms and electronic dictionaries which can be divided into two types: online dictionaries and off-line dictionaries (Tulgar, 2017).

A number of studies on the use of different types of dictionaries have pointed out the advantages of utilizing dictionaries in language learning, compared to no dictionary use (Chen, 2011; Hyun Ma & Cheon, 2016). In addition, Hayati and Fattahzadeh (2006) purposed that using a dictionary apparently has a significant effect on learners' performance. Moreover, it is evidenced that the use of dictionaries in L2/EFL learning can facilitate vocabulary learning and reading comprehension (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Hulstijn, Hollander & Greidanus, 1996; Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993).

Despite numerous advantages of dictionaries, it should be noted that learners cannot automatically acquire dictionary-using skills through the exposure to dictionaries, but through instruction. Many studies have revealed that a great number of English learners are not aware of dictionary using and are not adequately equipped with dictionary-using skills (Dong, 2001; Li & Lou, 2012). Additionally, it is reported that the choice of dictionaries can affect learners' ability of English learning because each type of dictionaries has both advantages and disadvantages (Zhang, 2007). As a result, the instruction on how to select suitable dictionaries and how to use dictionaries effectively should be taken into account. Training learners in how to use dictionaries is essential in equipping them with appropriate strategies to benefit from dictionaries as fundamental self-learning materials.

The current study aimed at exploring the tools English major students preferred to use while reading English texts. The tools investigated consisted of the following print dictionaries: English-Thai, Thai-English, and English-English; the electronic ones included on-line resources or translation application/programs and the talking dictionary. The study was carried out to answer the two research questions as follows;

1. What dictionaries do Thai EFL learners prefer to use while reading English texts?
2. Are there any differences between the high-proficient learners and the low-proficient learners in terms of dictionary preferences?

2. Literature Review

In the field of second language and foreign language learning, dated back to 1990s, a number of researchers have suggested the advantages of using dictionaries; dictionaries can facilitate reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Luppescu and Day (1993), for example, carried out a study with 293 Japanese EFL university students. The

participants were randomly classified into two groups: a treatment group (dictionary) and a control group (no dictionary). The two groups were asked to read a short story in class. The treatment group used a bilingual English-Japanese dictionary of their own choice while the control group was not allowed to use any dictionaries. Immediately after reading, they were given a multiple-choice vocabulary test. The findings suggested that the use of a dictionary can enhance vocabulary learning through reading.

Additionally, Knight (1994) conducted a study to find out the impact of electrical dictionaries on vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. The participants were randomly divided into two groups; the experimental group was allowed to use the online dictionary while the control group was not. The subjects were assigned to read two short Spanish passages online. After reading, they were required to take some notes in English and take two vocabulary tests later. One test asked the students to explain Spanish words in English, and the other was the multiple-choice test with five alternatives. Two weeks later, the tests were administrated again in the same way in order to measure the effect of long-term memory. The results showed that compared to the controlled group, the experimental group excelled in both vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. Moreover, students who used dictionaries while reading texts could remember word meanings more than those who did not use dictionaries. The similar result was also confirmed by Summers (1988), who reported that learners' reading comprehension was significantly improved by the use of dictionaries. Dictionaries have been proved very useful in bringing the students to a deeper understanding of the target language and helping them use the vocabulary correctly.

It should be noted, however, that another group of studies have reported that English language learners cannot automatically acquire dictionary-using skills; teachers need to raise students' awareness of dictionaries using and provide necessary instruction and training. Zhao (2004), for instance, investigated the English dictionary strategies of non-English major undergraduates. The results showed that the learners did not know well how to use English dictionaries. Meanwhile, teachers rarely supplied instructions on dictionary-using to the learners. The similar result was also confirmed by Chen (2007).

Rather than instructing learners to use dictionaries effectively, training in how to choose a right dictionary should be taken into account. A group of studies suggested that it is necessary for English learners to choose the suitable dictionaries according to the characters of dictionaries and their own English proficiency levels (Fan & Xiao, 2006, Shi & Pan, 2005; Wang, 2007).

With the increase of new technology, however, it seems English language learners in the modern world tend to apply electronic dictionaries more often than print dictionaries. Perry (2003), for instance, found that more than 80% of leaners preferred to use electronic dictionaries, compared to paper dictionaries. In the same vein, Kobayashi (2008) reported that a great number of EFL learners in Japan chose to use electronic dictionaries. The similar finding was also supported by the recent work conducted by Tulgar (2017), who investigated the use of dictionaries among Turkish learners of

English. The results showed that most of the learners preferred online dictionaries in practice because of the fast-speed search functionality.

It should be noted, however, that each type of dictionaries has both advantages and disadvantages. Electronic dictionaries are very useful when time is limited while paper dictionaries always provide more details about the new words. As suggested by Chen (2007), paper dictionaries should not be discarded for the convenience of online dictionaries. The claim was supported by Li & Lou (2012), who investigated dynamic trends of dictionary using in different stages of English language learning, reporting that the most-often-used dictionaries are both paper dictionaries and electronic dictionaries. The majority of junior and senior middle school students preferred to use paper dictionaries while advanced students used both kinds of dictionaries. The electronic dictionaries can immediately solve the problems in reading which is helpful to increase the learners' amount of reading. On the other hand, book dictionaries elongate the time period of their contacting new words which will benefit the acquisition of new words.

According to the literature, it seemed the past studies on dictionary using have not yet provided conclusive results with regards to learners' preferences of dictionary types. The further investigation on this area is, thus, greatly needed. Therefore, the current study was conducted in order to examine types of dictionaries Thai EFL learners with different English reading proficiency preferred to use while reading texts in English. The dictionaries in this study were classified into print dictionaries (English-Thai, Thai English, English-English) and electronic dictionaries (on-line resources or translation application/programs and the talking dictionary).

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Participants
The study was carried out with 135 third-year English major students drawn from three Thai public universities. All of the participants were Thai native speakers with the average age of 20.84 years. Their average year of learning English was 15.66 years. The 135 participants were classified into the three proficiency levels based on their score of a reading proficiency test. Therefore, the study included 47 participants in the high proficiency group, 65 participants in the intermediate proficiency group, and 29 participants in the low proficiency group.

3.2 Methods
To collect the data, the participants were assigned to complete a 30-item reading proficiency test written by the researcher based on Pearson and Johnson's (1978) taxonomy. All the reading test items were designed in the format of multiple choice questions. To ensure the validity of the research instrument, the test had been checked its construct validity, face validity, and content validity by three experts before it had been piloted with a group of English major students in the comparable setting. Cronbach's alpha reliability of the test was 0.875, showing that the test was a reliable

measuring instrument. Immediately after the test, the participants were asked to identify dictionaries they always used while reading texts in English. The question was in the multiple-response question so that students could choose more than answers. The obtained data were analyzed to find out the frequencies and the percentages. Then, a Z-test for proportions was employed to determine the significant level of the observed differences from the descriptive data.

4. Results and Discussions

For any reading practices, dictionaries are always the essential tools, including both print and electronic dictionaries. This study investigated what tools the third-year English major students applied while reading texts in English. The tools investigated in this study included the following print dictionaries: English-Thai, Thai-English, and English-English; the electronic ones included on-line resources or translation application/programs and the talking dictionary. The analysis of the responses started with the frequencies and the percentages; after that the Z-test for proportions was employed to determine the significance of the observed differences.

Table 1: The use of dictionaries of the third-year English major students

Dictionaries	High-proficient learners (N = 47)		Intermediate learners (N = 65)		Low-proficient learners (N = 29)		Overall (N = 135)	
	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)
English-Thai	29	70.73	57	87.7	27	93.10	**113**	**83.7**
Online resources	33	80.49	56	86.2	21	72.41	**110**	**81.5**
English-English	31	75.61	29	44.6	12	41.38	**72**	**53.3**
Thai-English	8	19.51	39	60.0	23	79.31	**70**	**51.9**
Talking dictionary	5	12.20	5	7.7	23	79.31	**13**	**9.6**

As can be seen in Table 1, overall, the participants in this study preferred to use English-Thai dictionaries the most (83.7%) while talking dictionaries were the least favorite (9.6%). On-line resources (81.5%), English-English dictionaries (53.3%) and Thai-English dictionaries (51.9%), were ranked as the second favorite, the third favorite and the forth favorite, respectively.

Based on the percentage analysis, it seemed more than 80% of the participants applied both print dictionaries (English-Thai dictionaries) and electronic ones (on-line resources). The findings support several past studies, reporting that learners of English preferred to use both paper dictionaries and electronic ones (Li & Lou, 2012). Electronic dictionaries help learners save a lot of time and can immediately solve the problems in reading which is helpful to increase the amount of reading. Meanwhile, print

dictionaries are more informative and offer learners a chance to acquire new words while searching the required vocabulary (Tulgar, 2017).

In addition, the study also compared the use of dictionaries among learners in the three reading proficiency levels: high, intermediate and low.
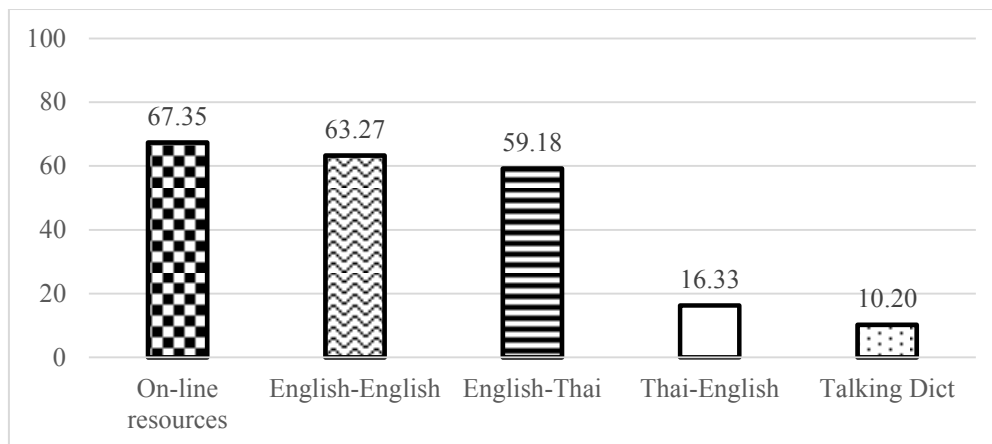

Figure 1: High-proficient learners' preferences of dictionaries

As can be seen in Figure 1, the high-proficient learners' top three dictionary preferences included on-line resources (67.35%), English-English dictionaries (63.27%) and English-Thai dictionaries (59.18%). Interestingly, the high-proficient learners rarely applied English-Thai dictionaries and talking dictionaries while reading English texts.
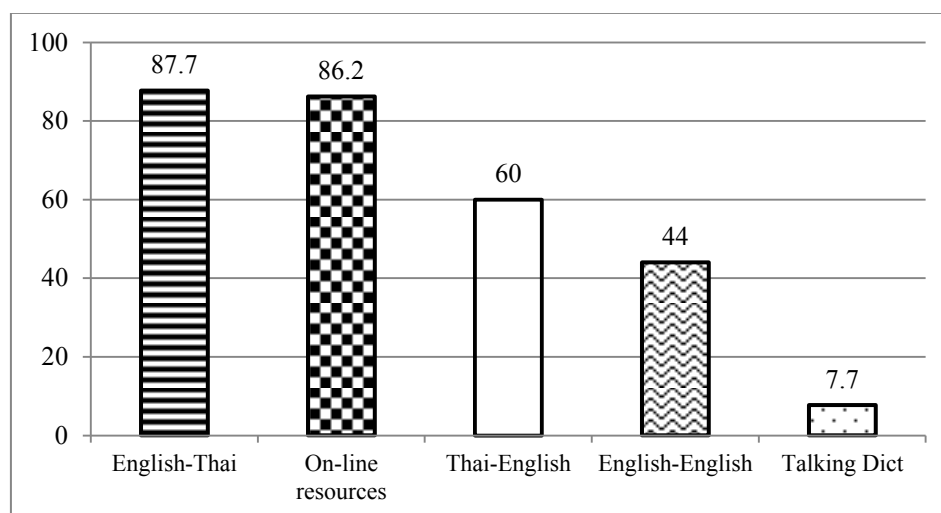
Figure 2: Intermediate learners' preferences of dictionaries

On the other hand, the intermediate proficiency group applied English-Thai dictionaries the most while reading English texts. As displayed in Figure 2 above, the intermediate learners' top three dictionary preferences consisted of English-Thai dictionaries (87.7%), on-line resources (86.2%) and Thai-English dictionaries (60%).
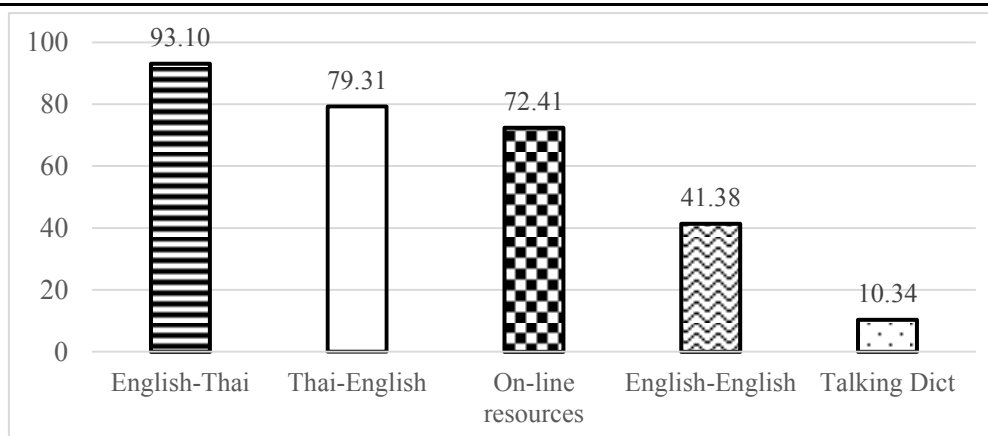
Figure 3: Low-proficient learners' preferences of dictionaries

Similar to the learners with intermediate proficiency, while reading English texts, the low-proficient learners applied English-Thai dictionaries more than any other dictionaries. As can be seen in Figure 3, the lower-proficient learners preferred English-Thai dictionaries (93.10%), Thai-English dictionaries (79.31 %) and on-line resources (72.41%) as the top three.

With respect to the use of talking dictionaries, it can be seen that all the three groups of learners ranked it as the least favorite. This could be because this type of dictionaries has been recently replaced by the new technology devices such as tablets, smartphones and laptops which offer leaners a number of functions including online dictionaries and translation applications/ programs.

Based on the percentage analysis, it seemed that the three groups of learners preferred to use both electronic dictionaries and paper dictionaries. In terms of electronic ones, all groups of learners preferred the on-line resources as the top three. Regarding print dictionaries, it seemed that the intermediate proficiency group and the low proficiency group preferred to use the two-language dictionaries at a higher degree and the one-language dictionaries at a lower degree than the high-proficient learners.

Finally, the study aimed to find out whether there were any significant differences between the high-proficient learners and the low-proficient learners with respect to the use of dictionaries. As displayed in Table 2 below, the Z-test for proportions showed that the significance lied in the high-proficient learners' application of English-English dictionaries and the low-proficient learners' application of English-Thai and Thai-English dictionaries ($P < 0.05$).

Table 2: The use of dictionaries: High-proficient vs. low-proficient learners

Dictionaries	High-proficient learners (N = 47)		Low-proficient learners (N = 29)		Z	P Value
	Frequency	Percent (%)	Frequency	Percent (%)		
On-line resources	33	80.49	21	72.41	0.793	0.430
English-English	**31**	**75.61**	**12**	**41.38**	**2.898**	**0.004***
English-Thai	**29**	**70.73**	**27**	**93.10**	**-2.305**	**0.021***
Thai-English	**8**	**19.51**	**23**	**79.31**	**-4.962**	**0.000***
Talking Dictionary	5	12.20	3	10.34	0.240	0.810

*p <0.05

The use of any dictionaries can facilitate language learning (Garcia, 2012; Prichard, 2008). However, as suggested by the results of this study, the choice of dictionaries might affect learners' exposure to the target language. With the use of monolingual dictionaries (English-English), the high-proficient learners could expand their opportunities for practicing their target language, resulting in more exposure to the target language and better reading competence. Laufer and Aviad (2006) proposed that monolingual dictionaries outperform bilingual dictionaries in the aspects of reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. Monolingual dictionaries provide more details and precise information about words in the target language. In other words, bilingual dictionaries give translation, rather than giving a definition. Moreover, many bilingual dictionaries also fail to give sufficient information about grammatical contexts, appropriateness, and connotation (Harmer, 2001). Thus, the use of such dictionaries might hinder language learners in developing the skill of using paraphrase to make up for words they do not know (Nation, 1990). However, due to the lack of cognitive competence in the target language, the low-proficient learners in this study heavily relied on bilingual dictionaries (English-Thai, Thai-English). The finding of this study is also in line with Hoang's (2016) study, reporting that low proficient readers relied on bilingual dictionaries whenever they encountered some uncommon words. This could come up with the conclusion that using bilingual dictionaries is a characteristic of poor leaners.

5. Recommendations

The study was designed for a quantitative approach. In order to substantiate and verify the findings, however, a qualitative study such as interviews should be included in the future investigations. Additionally, other factors contributing to the choice of dictionaries in the English language learning should be examined in the future studies.

6. Conclusion

Dictionaries are of great significance to enable language learners to develop the language skills and self-directed learning. However, as suggested by the results of this study, the choice of dictionaries might affect learners' exposure to the target language. Therefore, how to choose a suitable dictionary should be taken into account. In addition, training learners in how to use dictionaries is essential in equipping them with appropriate strategies to take advantages from dictionaries.

About the Author

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