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Online dictionaries – Renewed tools for the 21st century

Are they really used in our educational context?

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	3
1. INTRODUCTION	3
1.1. Objectives	5
1.2. Justification	5
1.3. Sections	7
2. LITERATURE REVIEW	8
3. METHODOLOGY	16
3.1 Research design	16
3.2. Sample	17
3.3 Variables	18
3.4. Instruments.....	19
3.5. Data collection	20
3.6. Data analysis	22
4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION.....	22
5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY	33
6. LINES OF FUTURE RESEARCH	35
7. CONCLUSION	37
8. REFERENCES	39

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Are they really used in our educational context?

ABSTRACT

The development of Internet-based technology has reached the school influence. And one of the most common tools in the English as a Foreign Language classroom, the dictionary, has not resisted. The existence of online versions of traditional and renowned dictionaries, as well as the proliferation of Smartphone applications, has made a significant difference and has facilitated the process of looking up words in an easier and faster way. In fact, thanks to the emergence of these devices, dictionaries now offer a wider variety of utilities such as the possibility of listening the pronunciation of words or the existence of fora to clear up some doubts, not to mention the frequent update. However, despite these obvious positive aspects, dictionaries are not always seen as a useful tool, and they pass unnoticed by students as a general rule. Traditionally, the size and weight of dictionaries were the main handicaps, but these aspects are not a problem anymore. So, the question that arises is, are online dictionaries really used by students in our context?

Key terms: Internet-based technology, online dictionaries, context, applications, Smartphones.

1. INTRODUCTION

When the first electronic computers began to be developed around the 1950s, probably, just a few people could think of the promising future of these devices. In fact, almost nobody could have ever thought of how the fact of UCLA professor Leonard Kleinrock connecting the first computer to the Internet in September 1969 would, eventually, end up turning our existence upside down.

The influence of the Internet is overwhelming. Our globalized world is more and more dependent on the Internet and all the applications which are born under its potential. The digital world is changing our customs and the way we deal with life and work. Now, communications are easier and faster, we can have an immediate access to information from all over the world, and also it is possible for many people to work from home or even order food and have it at home in just a few minutes.

The impact that Internet has in practically every aspect of our day-to-day life cannot be indifferent to school. The classroom cannot remain on the sidelines when dealing with new technologies which may have a relevant impact on the teaching-learning process. The proliferation of applications –a new twist in the development of Internet- has made it even easier, since we do not need a computer or laptop anymore, our telephone –smartphone- is the only tool we need. And, consequently, this fact has opened a window of opportunities to facilitate the access of our students to different applications which can have a positive impact in their learning process.

The variety of applications focused on learning is impressive. We can find different and varied options to improve our listening and pronunciation skills, games to enlarge our vocabulary, applications to practice miscellaneous grammar concepts or to broaden our knowledge about culture and literature. And, of course, we can find dictionaries and translators which are one step ahead of the traditional paper versions.

As you have probably anticipated, in this research study, we are going to focus on dictionaries, more specifically, on online dictionaries. The days when every boy and girl used to carry in their heavy backpacks a –small- dictionary to solve their questions about different meanings, spelling and even pronunciation are definitely coming to an end. The options nowadays are almost uncountable. In our smartphone, we can have access to multiple websites and applications such as Wordreference, Thesaurus, Reverso Context and so on which can turn to a useful help for our students.

The idea of this study is, on the one hand, to analyze the habits of our students regarding the frequent –or not- use of this type of applications and websites in the English lesson context. And, on the other hand, to consider possible options to encourage the use of this kind of tools, by learning how to take the most out of them. For this reason, we would like to go deeper into this issue to see how our students deal with these tools, how often they use them or which one is their favorite and why. To do so, we are going to hand in a questionnaire to our students where they will be asked about the previous topics such frequency of use, type of preferred format, how they value these applications, type of dictionary, among other questions. This way, they will be able to learn new options or rediscover some interesting aspects which were unknown for them and see which one can fit their necessities better. Also, they will be able to consider whether they can become part of their routine when facing the English teaching-

learning process. Since, among other reasons, dictionaries seem to be seen, still, as that heavy book, very complicated to work with and time-consuming every time we have to look up words and expressions. In other words, enlarge the options of our students and facilitate their work as much as possible by letting them know how these tools can be used, in the classroom or at home, to make the most out of them in order to, as we mentioned before, face the process of learning a new language in the most efficient way.

1.1. Objectives

As we mentioned previously, in the 21st century, online dictionaries represent a great improvement, since, among other aspects, they are more complete and easier to work with. However, are they really accepted and used in our English as Foreign Language classrooms?

From our perspective as teachers, it seems clear that students are not used to consulting dictionaries whenever they face an unknown word or expression. In fact, in general, they do not seem interested in acquiring new vocabulary by using this type of tools. For this reason, the objective of our study is to find out whether our students consult dictionaries on a regular basis, whether they take into consideration different aspects such accuracy, reliability or validation to choose the option which fits better their academic necessities and to help them identify the strong points related to the use of these devices.

1.2. Justification

When considering the importance and usefulness of –electronic- dictionaries in the EFL classroom, most of the literature available on this issue takes into consideration contexts which seem to be quite far away from our own. In fact, many of the studies were conducted in Asian universities such as Shantou University in China, Hiroshima Shudo University in Japan or the University of Tehran in Iran. This means that the use of electronic dictionaries has not been analyzed from our perspective, i.e., the Spanish educational context and, even more specifically, students from public high-schools in Andalusia.

For instance, in their study “The electronic dictionary in the language classroom: the views of language learners and teachers”, James Ronald and Shinya Ozawa from Hiroshima Shudo University show that the use of electronic dictionaries was widespread in formal educational contexts. In fact, as they say, in some classrooms, the electronic dictionary was the only

dictionary to be seen and it was brought to class in a larger proportion than it was its paper forbear. In fact, they add that the electronic dictionary seemed to be used more frequently and more indiscriminately than were paper dictionaries. In their opinion, the nature of the electronic dictionary, together with its increased presence in the language class, has brought various changes to learner dictionary use.

However, from our perspective as teachers, we must admit that, in our context, the use of electronic dictionaries is not as widespread as it is in the previous Japanese context. If we observe our lessons, it is very rare to see our students looking up words in a dictionary, paper format or electronic, they just do not see the point in finding out the meaning of a particular word or expression; they ask the teacher or simply wait for another person to ask the same doubt. At home, this may change a bit, because they feel more comfortable and have more options available. Or they think so. Also, the option may exist that they need some guidance or training when using the electronic dictionary in order to make the most out of it.

Besides, we cannot help but observe an important lack of awareness regarding the use of this type of tools in the English lesson. In fact, it seems quite common to see how students miss very interesting and useful options whereas they prefer to use, almost compulsively, pretty basic ones such as Google Translator and other of the like. This option, which could be useful in some very particular moments, can be very confusing and lead to errors, since the students cannot see the different possible translations of a specific word, ignoring this way the importance of word categories and contexts where that word can, or cannot, be used.

A very illustrative example of how important word categories and context are could be the word “cómoda”. As a polysemic word, it means comfortable –the feminine form- or chest of drawers –the piece of furniture. If our students decide to use a tool such as the previously mentioned Google Translator, the first and only option they will receive will be “cómoda”. When dealing, for example, with a translation activity, students may encounter this word and their success will depend, not just on the tool they use, but on the way they use it and their previous knowledge about it. On the contrary, if they decided to use another type of dictionary, such as Wordreference –another widespread option- they would have the chance to see the different translation options for that word, letting them analyze which one fits better their necessities according to the word category and other important aspects.

The idea, therefore, is to analyze why this happens and to encourage our students to adopt these new devices, at least, to enlarge their options of success in the process of learning a second language. And, why not, to help them see a dictionary as a life-long tool which may help them simply to satisfy curiosity in every context, at any time of their lives.

1.3. Sections

First of all, you can find the literature review where some prior studies on the topic will be commented. A comprehensive picture which starts with some brief notes on the origin of dictionaries and follows with the relevance of Asian countries in this type of studies. Asian countries such as Japan, China or Korea have been at the forefront in the analysis of the impact of online dictionaries in the process of learning English as a foreign language. Also, our research will be presented, highlighting the niche of study it expects to fill.

Then, in the methodology section, all the methodological aspects of our study will be explained, and also how our research has been designed. The samples we have worked with, i.e., the participants in our study and their characteristics, and also the variables which have to be taken into consideration (dependent/ independent, intervening or moderator and subject or identification) when conducting our investigation. In this section, the instruments – questionnaires- are also going to be explained, as well as the processes of data collection and data analysis.

After the methodological analysis, the results obtained will be carefully considered in the results and discussion section. Besides, these results will be related to our initial objectives, confirming or refuting our initial hypothesis.

Below, in the limitations of the study section, we will explain the limitations that our investigation has presented and other aspects which may have caused unexpected results.

Before the conclusion, you will find a section entitled lines of future research where some suggestions will be made to help continue advancing the research in this field.

Finally, the conclusion section where the main points our study, as well as our findings, will be highlighted. And the references section where all the bibliographical references will be added.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

If we take a look at the etymology of the word dictionary found in the Online Etymology Dictionary, we can see how this word started to be used around the 16th century. Among other different sources, this interesting website dates the origin of this word from Medieval Latin word *dictionarius* “of words” from *dictio* “word”, and also noun of action from past participle stem of *dicere* “speak, tell, say”. According to it, it is possible that the first English use in title of a book was in Sir Thomas Elyot’s “Latin Dictionary” in 1538; although Latin *Dictionarius* was used from early 13th century.

In the first definition provided by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a dictionary is “a reference source in print or electronic form containing words usually alphabetically arranged along with information about their forms, pronunciations, functions, etymologies, meanings, and syntactic and idiomatic uses”. And in the Oxford English Dictionary, available online for the students of *UJA*, a dictionary is defined as:

A book which explains or translates, usually in alphabetical order, the words of a language or languages (or of a particular category of vocabulary), giving for each word its typical spelling, an explanation of its meaning or meanings, and often other information, such as pronunciation, etymology, synonyms, equivalents in other languages, and illustrative examples.

Apart from this definition, we can read historical notes such as:

The earliest books to be referred to as dictionaries in English were those in which the meanings of the words of one language or dialect were given in another (or, in a polyglot dictionary, in two or more languages). Dictionaries (thus named) of this type began to appear in England during the 16th cent., initially of Latin, later of modern languages (see quots. 1538 at β. , 1547 at β. respectively), although of course such works had been compiled and disseminated under other names long before this (see etymology for information about cognate words in other European languages).

The electronic variety has become an essential form and nowadays it is widely used around the world. As we can see, one of the main examples is the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary, which was launched in 2000 as a digital companion to the paper version. As we can read in its website, this online dictionary “offers access to Oxford English Dictionary in its most recent version and it is updated every three months to provide users with the results of the current research and revision of our editors”. This aspect is especially useful since language is something alive, which changes and adopts new words and expressions frequently. For this reason, the fact that online versions of dictionaries can be updated regularly will improve the usefulness of them.

Electronic dictionaries, as well as the Internet itself, have evolved along the years. Not so long time ago, electronic dictionaries were small devices, similar to an electronic agenda, or even a calculator, which would work without an Internet connection. However, the use of this small device was never widespread. For instance, from my personal experience as a student of Translation and Interpreting, this type of dictionaries was not common among my colleagues, despite the fact that a dictionary was an essential tool for us. On the contrary, the arrival of smartphones meant a significant difference when referring to electronic dictionaries. It was not necessary any more to carry around our dictionary, whatever its format was. Now, we just needed our smartphone, an Internet connection and, of course, reception. On the one hand, connecting to a particular website to look up a word or expression was –and still is- easier than ever, but what is more interesting and relevant is the proliferation of applications which are facilitating this process even more. Some of them are for free, whereas to access others, you have to pay.

The term smartphone was not used until 1995. However, in an article published in *Business Insider*, we can read that three years earlier the first real smartphone appeared when the IBM’s Simon Personal Communicator was released. As we can read, this phone was the first to meld together the functions of a cell phone and a PDA and appeared 15 years before the launching of Apple’s iPhone. However, concerning the apps phenomenon, they were predicted even before. As we can read in a very interesting article by *The Guardian* called “1983 to today: a history of mobile apps” it was in 1983 when Steve Jobs discussed a software distribution center similar to a record store where system could be bought over phone lines. As the author says, “Apps emerged from early PDAs, through the addictively

simple game Snake on the Nokia 6110 phone, to the first 500 apps in the Apple App Store when it made its debut in July 2008”. Dictionaries, of course, were not unconnected to this phenomenon and many of them developed their own Internet-based dictionary applications such as Wordreference, Reverso Context and so on. The exact date of their development is not very precise, but it is a fact that there are multiple applications related to the learning process, not only dictionaries, and that they are here to stay to facilitate us the access to this essential tool of learning.

Despite these positive factors which could make dictionaries more appealing to our students, the reality in most of our classrooms is that the use of dictionaries in the English lesson is not as common as it would be expected. In fact, it is particularly shocking to realize that, although every student has a mobile phone, they do not see the point in looking up words when completing a task. As different studies have tried to prove (Laufer and Hill, 2000; Koyama and Takeuchi, 2004), the process of looking up a word in a dictionary affects the EFL learning process in a positive way.

Regarding the existence of prior research on this topic, it is important to bear in mind two important aspects which have already been mentioned. On the one hand, much of the literature at our disposal is based on electronic dictionaries as they were understood before the influence of the smartphones; and, on the other hand, most of the studies were conducted in Asian countries.

A possible answer to the fact that most of the studies have taken place in Asian countries can be found in the research “Students’ use of portable electronic dictionaries in the EFL/ESL classroom: a survey of teacher attitudes” by Vivian Midlane (2005). In her opinion, “students from East Asian countries are identified as being more likely than others to bring portable electronic dictionaries to class. Arabic-speaking students, who share with East Asian students the issue of an L1 which uses a different script from the target language, are another sizable group who bring portable electronic dictionaries to class”. Also, in that same study we can read, in the words of the author, how this growth in the use of these devices has been a bottom-up movement, since it is students who have chosen to bring these devices to class in increasing numbers, whereas in that research she has found hardly any instances of teachers recommending or encouraging their students to buy and use portable electronic dictionaries.

As we have just mentioned, most of the studies available focused on the idea of electronic dictionaries as specific devices similar to an electronic agenda; however, the generalized idea we have today is an application in our smartphone. In his study “Changes in electronic dictionary usage patterns in the age of free online dictionaries: implications for vocabulary acquisition”, John Collins pays special attention to this matter and tries to analyse the patterns of use of English as a Foreign Language students at Japanese universities regarding paper dictionaries, electronic dictionaries and Internet-based dictionaries, making a clear distinction between the last two.

According to his findings, “Japanese university students have moved away from traditional paper dictionaries and are in a transitional phase away from electronic dictionaries”. In his opinion, electronic and paper dictionaries “are designed with the learner in mind”, whereas “the same cannot absolutely be said of the ubiquitous Internet-based translation and dictionary applications available online”, and, as the author remarks, it is difficult for teachers to monitor the applications that they use regularly. Also, from Collins’s point of view, techniques such as copying and pasting available in some of these applications, as well as Google translate, require a lower depth of processing –involvement load- than with paper or electronic dictionaries.

It is also very interesting to see how the use of dictionaries in the EFL learning process is intimately linked to the acquisition of vocabulary. There are many studies which have focused on this idea. For instance, in “The lexical plight in second language reading: words you don't know, words you think you know and words you can't guess” by Batia Laufer (1997), we can see how learners must face unknown words with a combination of guessing strategies and previous background. There are other authors who take into consideration the influence that the process of looking up a word in the dictionary has in our memory. More specifically, authors such as Luppescu and Day (1993) consider that looking up words in the dictionary makes a difference, since it is likely that some of these words are better retained in our memory. Other authors go even deeper into this issue when establishing that:

Support was found for the hypothesis that frequency of occurrence will foster incidental vocabulary learning more when advanced second language (L2) readers are given the meanings of unknown words through marginal glosses or when they look up meanings in a dictionary than when no external information concerning unknown

words' meanings is available. In the former case, reappearance of a word will reinforce the form-meaning connection in the reader's mental lexicon. In the latter case, readers will often ignore unknown words or incorrectly infer their meanings, which will limit the frequency effect. (Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus, 1996)

Concerning the way –electronic- dictionaries affect the vocabulary acquisition process, the study “Electronic dictionaries and incidental vocabulary acquisition: does technology make a difference?” by Laufer (2000) is particularly interesting. In a practical way, the author intends to show how different vocabulary acquisition can be in two different reading conditions. These conditions refer to the way unknown words are encountered, i.e., whether these unknown words are in a paper text and glossed in the margin or on a computer screen and explained in an electronic dictionary. After the study, conducted with two parallel groups of advanced university learners of EFL in Israel, the conclusions of her study were clear: an electronic gloss is superior to a paper gloss for the acquisition of new vocabulary. In her opinion, based on the research, one of the main reasons of these results may be “the visual impact produced by a word which embedded in a window and appears in a prominent position on the computer screen”, since “a marginal gloss in a paper may not have the same prominence, and may therefore fail to create a memory trace to the word”. Another possible explanation for this “superiority” of electronic gloss may be found in a preview of a prospective study with Hulstijn (Hulstijn and Laufer, 2001) where it is stated that “that words that are processed with higher involvement load will be retained better than words that are processed with lower involvement load”, taking into consideration that those who worked with an electronic gloss were told “to click on the unknown word and then to choose the options that would best clarify the meaning of the word in the text”.

However, there are also critical voices with this issue such as Johanna Stirling’s in her article “The portable electronic dictionary: faithful friend or faceless foe”. Stirling (2005) considers that “although for task completion the speed of the PED –portable electronic dictionary- seems useful, it may be disadvantageous for actually learning vocabulary”. In her opinion, “unlike the learner using the PED, the student with the paper dictionary needs to engage with the English word. This deeper processing is more likely to fix the lexical item into the student’s brain”.

Anyway, one of the main positive aspects that we all agree with when talking about online dictionaries is speed. We all have the idea that consulting an online dictionary is faster than consulting a paper dictionary, and the study “An experiment using electronic dictionaries with EFL students” by Weschler and Pitts (2000) helps to prove that.

The purpose of this study was just a matter of speed, that is, “how quickly students could find the definition(s) of an unknown word”. In fact, they did not consider “the quality or number or definitions, nor even students’ ability to read and comprehend them”. In this study, the authors also demonstrated that electronic dictionaries “can be somewhat faster, but this small speed difference is probably not enough to justify their extra cost when looking up the words needed to understand an L2 reading passage or write a report in L2 for homework”, considering that in these types of activities, reading comprehension and writing, students make more frequent use of online dictionaries. In their investigation, they found that there is a 23 % speed difference, a difference that could be considered “a decisive factor when trying to follow the content of a conversation”. On the contrary, the results of a questionnaire that they provided to the participants in their study determined that “almost none of their respondents takes advantages of electronic dictionaries superior look-up speed when speaking in or listening to the L2”.

The authors also point out how this differs from “what is generally considered to be the natural order of language acquisition, at least in children learning their L1”. In this natural order of acquisition, skills would be acquired as follows: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, as Weschler and Pitts highlight, the order of acquisition of their participants would be: reading, writing, speaking and listening. In their words, “if learners are trying to master English for communicative purposes as many claim to be, then using their electronic dictionaries counter to the natural order of acquisition is like swimming upstream”.

In 1997, there existed already studies regarding the pros and cons of electronic dictionaries, although as we have mentioned, in that time, electronic dictionaries were different from the Internet-based devices we know and use now. In a very interesting article by Gloria Tang called “Pocket electronic dictionaries for second language learning: help or hindrance?”, the author focused on the concerns teachers of English as a Second Language had about the use of bilingual electronic dictionaries by their students.

According to her findings, the main strength of this kind of devices was the confidence they gave to the English as a Second Language students who owned one, and also the fact that some teachers found them useful as an additional resource, although not the only one. In her opinion, teachers on the whole “do not object to recently arrived students using an electronic dictionary, particularly in multilevel classes where the students might be more likely to be engaged in individualized learning”. However, the weaknesses of these dictionaries seemed to be more relevant than the strengths.

As Tang (1997) pointed out in her study, negative perceptions of teachers could be divided into two categories: social and academic. In her words, teachers believed that electronic dictionaries encourage “antisocial behavior in students because they interact with the machine rather than with other students”. Besides, some teachers also thought that an excessive dependence on these dictionaries could make students reluctant to take risks. Also, the distraction factor was taken into consideration, since one of the main concerns of teachers was how distracting is, for instance, “when students pass their machines around, when they play games, and when they do not listen to the teacher”. Nowadays, this factor is gaining more and more importance since electronic dictionaries are a part of our mobile phones and it is very easy to get distracted by social networks –Twitter, Instagram- and applications such as WhatsApp when using our Internet-based dictionaries in our Smartphones. However, when considering academic weaknesses, Tang also found that some teachers were worried about the quality of these dictionaries, whereas others were concerned about the fact that “if they allow students to use the electronic dictionary, they are not encouraging them to learn through text and that they are not providing for the students to move away from word level to sentence level and discourse level”.

Once we know the opinion of the teachers, it would be interesting, from the students’ perspective, to recognize that there can be weak points regarding its use and it should be equally interesting whether our students can identify them or not. In their study “The use of electronic dictionaries in EFL classroom”, Huibin Zheng and Xialo Wang take into consideration possible weak points related to the use of electronic dictionaries. In their opinion, this type of device “can prevent students guessing skills and contextualized thinking in vocabulary acquisition”. Also, they consider another possible drawback when using them:

distraction. In their words, “when students are trying to look up the meaning of new words, they tend to go straight ahead and look up every unknown word they come across because it is easy and fast for them”. Besides, we cannot forget that the electronic dictionaries of today are in our smartphones, so it is very likely that our students feel distracted by other kind of applications – those of different social networks-, while looking up words and expressions.

Along the same lines, Johanna Stirling wondered in her article published in 2005 whether the portable electronic dictionary is a faithful friend or a faceless foe. In a very eloquent example, the author illustrates some of the problems that an excessive use of electronic –but also online- dictionaries may cause:

In small groups students are discussing family life in their countries. Tomoko has an interesting contribution to make but does not know the exact word in English. She looks it up in her portable electronic dictionary (PED) while the discussion continues. By the time she has found the word, the discussion has moved to a different stage and there is something else she could say. But again, as she practices it in her head, she knows there is a very good word she could use, so she consults the dictionary again. This continues until it is too late for her to say any words at all in the discussion and family life in Japan remains a mystery to the other members of her group. (Stirling 65)

Situations such as the previous one may occur quite often, and sometimes they may lead to a certain delay in the usual development of our lessons when giving instructions or explanations about a certain topic. As Stirling (2005) says, “the speed and ease of use of PEDs do encourage overuse”. It is a fact that user-friendly dictionaries can help students, not least beginners, to take a better control over their learning process, by making them take their own decisions such as which word they need to look up instead of waiting for the teacher’s instructions. However, as Stirling says, some students are very dependent on dictionaries. In her words, “many, especially those aiming for higher education in an English-speaking environment, seem to believe that knowing every word they meet is the secret of success”. Nevertheless, “this knowing is often passive only and does not stretch to a desire or ability to use words productively”.

It seems to be clear that some of the benefits of using a dictionary in the English as a Foreign Language classroom have been studied. However, the niche that our study expects to fill is to establish and analyze the influence that these new type of electronic dictionaries have in our

particular educational context. As we mentioned before, most of the studies which have focused on the impact –of any kind- of electronic dictionaries have taken place in Asian countries such as China, Japan or Korea. So, in our opinion, it would be interesting to approach this aspect of education from a more local perspective, i.e., an average 2st year group of *Bachillerato*, in a public high school in a small town in the interior of Andalusia.

In our case, our goal would be to conduct a study to show the role that online dictionaries play in the English as a Foreign Language learning process in our local context. We would take into consideration aspects such as: how familiar our students are with this kind of devices, how often they use them and why, which aspects they take into consideration when choosing one dictionary or another (reliability, speed, variety of options like pronunciation, discussion forum to clear up questions), which type they consult the most (bilingual, synonyms and antonyms, monolingual), in which type of activity they think it is more useful the use of an online dictionary, but also disadvantages and negative effects of them such as possible distractions or the importance of teacher's guidance. To do so, we are going to use a questionnaire to collect the impressions and ideas of our students regarding these issues.

3. METHODOLOGY

Regarding the methodological aspects of our study, they will be analyzed in the following sections.

3.1 Research design

Taking into consideration Nunan's "Methods in second language classroom-oriented research. A critical review" and Seliger and Shohamy's "Second language research methods", we could analyse our study from different perspectives.

According to the general framework, we are dealing with a practical research, since the focus of our study is on the classroom. To be more specific, the focus is on the use of online dictionaries and their benefits, *a priori*, in the learning process.

Also, according to the source of information, we could say that our research is a combination of primary and secondary research. This combination derives from the use primary sources of

information (our students) via case studies focused on a determined number of individuals in a longitudinal way, but also via statistical studies, since some experimental studies will be conducted by using questionnaires. Regarding the secondary research, there will be also secondary sources such as articles and electronic publications, which means that library search and surfing the Internet will be necessary.

Regarding the approach followed in our study, this will be analytic since the idea of this research is to identify and analyse a single factor –the use of online dictionaries- which may be a possible constituent of a major system such as the influence of the use of this type of dictionaries in the learning process, in particular, in the vocabulary acquisition process.

Considering the purpose, our study is deductive due to the fact that a particular hypothesis is expected to be tested. And that is the hypothesis which considers that the use of online dictionaries has positive effect in the acquisition of vocabulary.

Finally, when considering the data, several factors must be taken into consideration. On the one hand, we have to refer to the form of the data, that is, qualitative data because our collected data will have a subjective and ungeneralizable nature. Also, it is necessary to determine how our data has been collected. In this case, it is an experimental or a quasi-experimental method, since it will be a classroom-based collection of data. Besides, regarding the time required to collect our data, due to the limited time we have at our disposal, this study will be cross-sectional, since the data will be obtained at a single point in time. In the last place, it is important to highlight the nature of our analysis method. Due to the characteristics of our study, which have been previously mentioned, it seems reasonable to conduct an interpretative analysis, due to qualitative nature of our data.

3.2. Sample

The sample with which we have worked in our research is a heterogeneous group. The group consists of 34 students who are taking the second year of *Bachillerato*, as we mentioned before, in what is popularly known as adult school. 19 of them belong to a blended learning group, whereas the other 15 attend face-to-face lessons.

In total, there are 19 men between the ages of 18 and 32, whereas the 15 women are between 17 and 53. All of them come from the same town or other nearby small villages.

In general, their linguistic level in English presents certain weaknesses; however, the fact that they are attending the last year of Post-Compulsory Secondary Education, assures a certain degree of competence in the foreign language. Although this may be affected by the fact that some of them dropped their studies some time ago and now have decided to retake them.

Since our study focuses on online dictionaries, it is important to know whether our students have an internet connection at their disposal to make use of them. In this case, all our participants have an Internet connection both at home and in their mobile phones.

3.3 Variables

Now that we have presented our sample, it is necessary to highlight the different variables that have been taken into consideration:

As a dependent variable, the most important to be observed is the vocabulary competence in the English language, which it is straightly linked to that same competence in the Spanish language, since the whole point of using online dictionaries is an improvement in our vocabulary acquisition process.

Considering the independent variable, it is the use of that kind of dictionaries, or the dictionary itself, which is thought to have an effect on the vocabulary acquisition process when looking up unknown words and expressions. But also there is an effect on the communicative competence when checking the pronunciation of a word to communicate in a more accurate way.

Also, there are moderating variables which have to be dealt with. From our point of view, the most relevant ones are motivation, sociocultural status, verbal intelligence and exposure to English as a Foreign Language subject. The lack of motivation is one of the main handicaps in the learning process. In general, people who attend this kind of studies are people who dropped out of school for different reasons –mainly work or family- and have decided to go

back to their studies essentially to improve their employment options. This means that their education or academic training is basic and limited, and weaknesses are revealed. Unfortunately, despite the fact that they have decided to retake studies, in some cases, this cannot be translated into an enhancement in their motivation. Our students, with some exceptions, do not feel a real interest towards the English language, so they do not delve into positive options such as the exposure to English outside school.

Finally, regarding the identification variables, they are connected with the moderating variables, since they refer to the particular characteristics of the individuals involved in our study and. As we have mentioned before, although it is a heterogeneous group considering the age of the participants, it is pretty homogeneous when considering essential factors such as motivation, interest and status.

3.4. Instruments

The questions formulated in our questionnaire are slightly based on the questionnaire proposed by Koyama and Takeuchi in their article “Comparing electronic and printed dictionaries: how the difference affected EFL learning”. However, in their case, the questionnaire was thought to be “administered to assess their impressions –of the participants- on two types of dictionaries they had used in the experiment”. In our case, this tool is thought to be a way to know beforehand what our students know about dictionaries, how often they use them, their reference dictionaries, or in which type of exercise/ activity it is more useful to use a dictionary. Following these ideas, the questionnaire tries to be as complete and accurate as possible.

Regarding instrument validation, we had to face reality. Considering the characteristics of our groups of students and our school and the limitations of our academic calendar, the options were pretty limited. In fact, it has been the tutor of the Master Thesis who has validated this questionnaire. Regarding the number of subjects, every group is different and some of the groups are pretty reduced, not to mention the absenteeism more or less generalized in these studies. So a decision had to be made, and we opted for two groups of second year of *Bachillerato* –being one of them a blended learning group with just a tuition hour per week-. Anyway, these aspects will be analyzed in depth in its corresponding section.

Finally, it is important to underline how our instruments have been administered. In this case, the administration of the questionnaire was non-distracting and uniform as far as possible. It was planned to be answered in an autonomous and clear way. For this reason, most of the questions had to be answered with a yes or with a no, or with several options which were provided. Just in a few cases, participants were asked to write down an example. And only the last two were open questions, where students could expand on, although brief responses were recommended.

Also, respecting the format used to elaborate and fill both the questionnaire and the tests, it is paper-based format to facilitate the completion of these tasks by our students/ subjects involved.

3.5. Data collection

As we have already pointed out, we have used a mixed questionnaire which consisted of 15 questions. Most of the questions are closed- ended, in some cases with a final open question to add a particular example, whereas the last two are more open-ended, since they focus on the advantages and disadvantages of online dictionaries. In the questionnaire, written in Spanish to facilitate its comprehension to our students, the following questions were formulated:

Cuestionario sobre el uso del diccionario en el área de inglés

Hombre / Mujer Edad: Localidad de origen:

¿Dispones de internet en casa? SÍ / No ¿Y en el móvil? SÍ / No

1. ¿Tienes alguna app de diccionario inglés – español/ inglés-español descargada en tu Smartphone o Tablet? SÍ / No

¿Cuál? _____

2. ¿Tienes alguna app de diccionario monolingüe (inglés-inglés) descargada en tu Smartphone o Tablet? SÍ / No ¿Cuál? _____

3. *¿Usas algún diccionario bilingüe español-inglés/ inglés-español en papel en casa?*
SÍ / No ¿Lo sueles utilizar? SÍ/ No

4. *¿Cuántas veces utilizas el diccionario electrónico a la semana?*

A. A menudo B. Algunas veces C. Rara vez D. Nunca

5. *¿Cuál es tu diccionario electrónico de referencia para trabajar en el área de inglés?*

A. Wordreference B. Google translator C. Otro _____

6. *¿Usas la transcripción fonética o el audio para saber la pronunciación?*

SÍ / No

7. *¿Tienes en cuenta la información gramatical que se da, si es que se da?*

SÍ / No

8. *¿Tienes en cuenta los ejemplos que se dan? SÍ / No*

9. *¿Te conformas con las primeras definiciones o buscas hasta que encuentras la definición que mejor se adapta a la frase que estás leyendo?*

Me conformo / Sigo buscando

10. *¿Utilizas más de un diccionario electrónico? SÍ / No*

¿Cuál/es? _____ , _____

11. *¿Qué haces si no encuentras la definición que resuelve tus dudas en un diccionario electrónico?*

A. Acudes a otro diccionario B. Buscas en Google C. Lo dejas

12. *¿Utilizas el teclado del Smartphone o el micrófono para introducir los términos de búsqueda? Teclado / Micrófono*

13. *Cuando lees textos impresos, ¿en qué soporte utilizas diccionarios?*

- A. *Smartphone* B. *Tablet* C. *Ordenador*
D. *Papel* E. *No utilizo diccionarios*

14. *A modo de resumen, ¿cuáles son las principales ventajas de los diccionarios electrónicos? (Responde de forma breve)*

15. *¿Crees que hay alguna desventaja en el uso de diccionarios electrónicos? SÍ / No ¿Cuál/ es? (Responde de forma breve)*

It is essential to highlight that, although it was not a method planned intentionally, the observation of the students while fulfilling the questionnaire was very revealing. As some of them raised doubts and made comments which provided interesting information which could be added to the information obtained from the questionnaire.

3.6. Data analysis

Due to the characteristics and the variables of our participants, to perform the analysis of our data, an Excel table has been used in order to obtain the percentages which have illustrated the results of our investigation.

Although it is a very simple statistical operation, a rule of three has been used in order to interpret the different pieces of information provided by our participants, taking into consideration their gender as the differentiating variable. This has been possible thanks to the fact that our sample is greater than 30 subjects, which may be a good approximation of results. Besides, it is necessary to point out that the percentages have been provided without decimals to avoid a tedious representation of the results.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Now that we have explained how our data has been collected, it is necessary to analyze the results obtained. To do so, we are going to analyze each question separately. However, before

that, it is important to mention that several questionnaires, four to be specific, were not completely filled in. In the four of them, students forgot writing down their age, whereas in the fourth questionnaire, most of the questions were not answered. This means that the answers to these questionnaires will be used as long as the age factor is not being taken into consideration, i.e., they cannot be used to analyse those aspects related to the age of the participants as a relevant factor. The fourth questionnaire will be discarded.

The objective of this study was –is- to analyse the use our students make of online dictionaries as educational tools in the English as a Foreign Language learning process, because, as different studies have showed (Laufer and Hill, 2000; Koyama and Takeuchi, 2004), the use of this type of dictionaries may be very beneficial, especially in such important aspects like vocabulary acquisition (Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus, 1996) by contrast with the less effective use of dictionaries in paper format (Laufer, 2000). However, when gathering information about the topic, it caught our attention the fact that most of the investigations had been performed in Asian countries, possibly because, Asian and Arabic-speaking students were more likely to bring portable dictionaries on a regular basis (Midlane, 2005).

Now, let us see the answers provided by our students:

1. *¿Tienes alguna app de diccionario inglés – español/ inglés-español descargada en tu Smartphone o Tablet? SÍ / No ¿Cuál? _____*

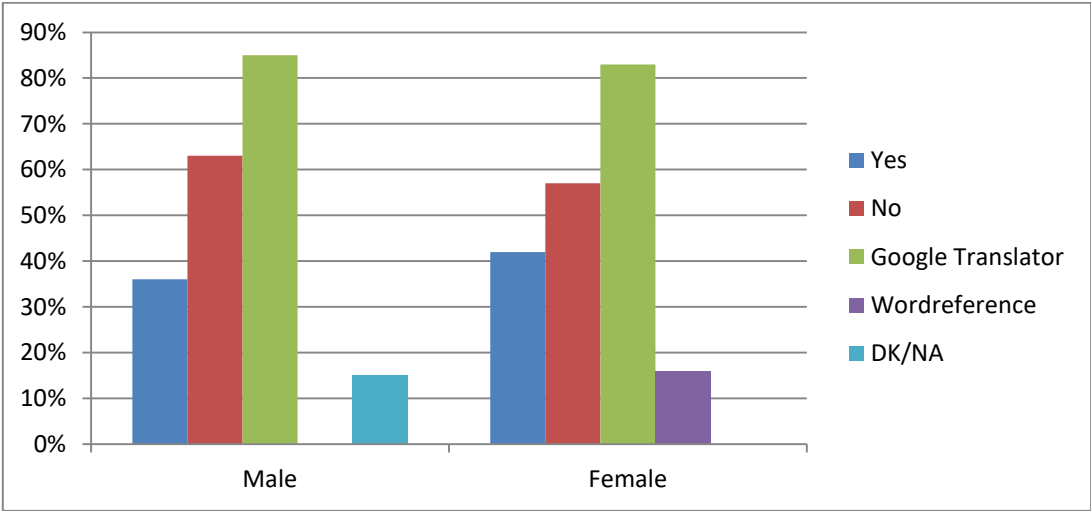


Chart 1. Respondents who have applications downloaded in their smartphones. And which applications.

In the case of the students who took part in the study, when they were asked whether or not they have a dictionary application in their mobile phones, the more generalized answer is no, a 63%, although in the case of female participants the distance between yes and no is smaller, 42 % vs 57 %. However, what we can see is that in the case they have answered affirmatively, the most generalized application is Google –Google translator- which comes downloaded automatically when we buy a new telephone. However, it is interesting to see how new options appear, although in a more limited way.

2. *¿Tienes alguna app de diccionario monolingüe (inglés-inglés) descargada en tu Smartphone o Tablet? SÍ / No ¿Cuál? _____*

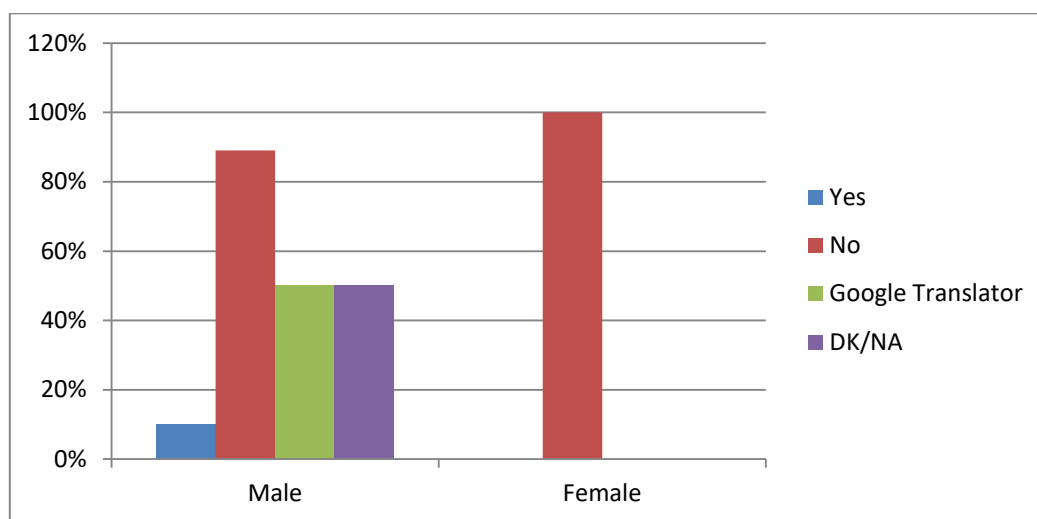


Chart 2. Respondents who have monolingual dictionary applications downloaded in their smartphones. An which ones.

The idea of a monolingual dictionary English-English is not considered among our students, as our results confirm - an 89 % in the case of male participants and a 100 % in the case of females. In fact, while participants were completing the questionnaire, two of them asked about this, because they did not understand what we were asking about. It was when I compared this kind of dictionary with the *RAE* dictionary when they understood what we were referring too. Before that, they did not take into consideration the existence of this type of dictionary.

3. *¿Usas algún diccionario bilingüe español-inglés/ inglés-español en papel en casa? SÍ / No ¿Lo sueles utilizar? SÍ/ No**

* There have been some errata in the wording and both questions together are redundant. For this reason, the second one has been omitted.

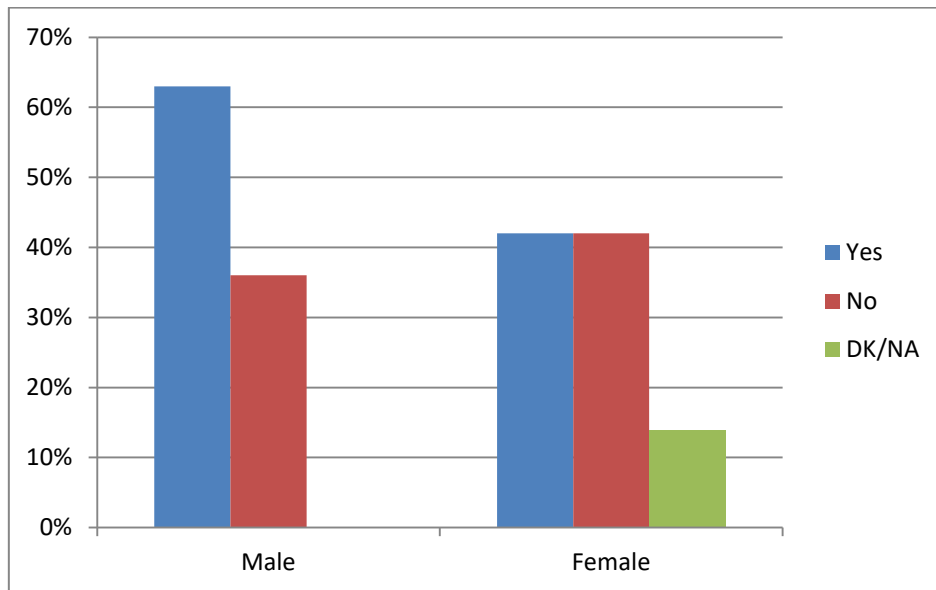


Chart 3. Respondents who use Spanish-English/ English-Spanish dictionaries in paper format at home.

Although it seems clear that the existence of online dictionaries has made a fundamental difference, it is true that students still see the paper version as a useful resource. In different percentages, male (63 %) and female (42 %), they make use of them at home, possibly one of those paper dictionaries that were not so uncommon a few years ago in class.

4. ¿Cuántas veces utilizas el diccionario electrónico a la semana?

- A. A menudo B. Algunas veces C. Rara vez D. Nunca

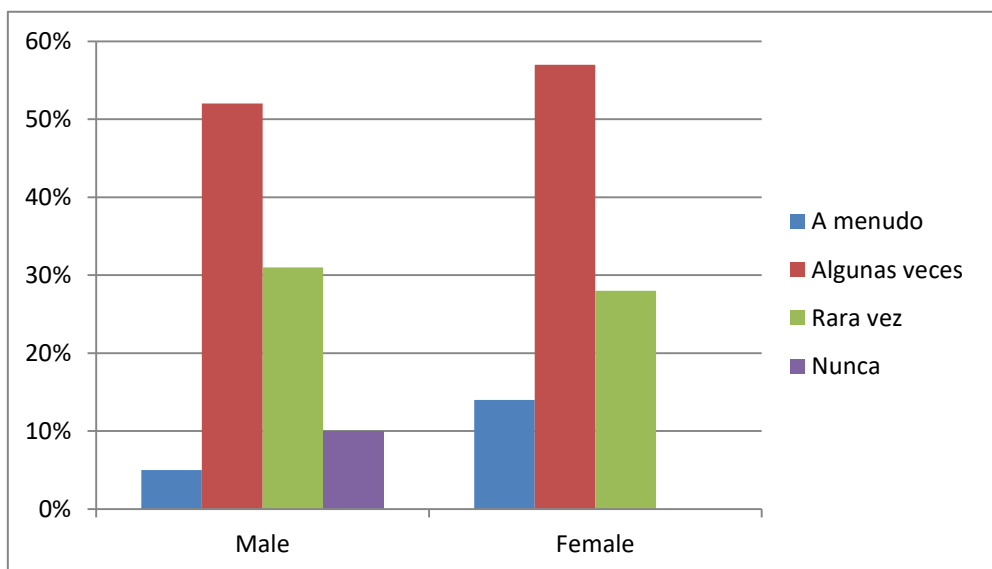


Chart 4. Frequency of use of electronic dictionaries.

Considering the frequency of use, it seems clear that both, male and female participants use online dictionaries in the same regular basis, that is, sometimes. However, it is true that in the case of male participants, it catches our attention the fact that there is a significant 10 % of students who never use them and just a 5 % who uses them “often”, whereas in the case of female participants is 14 %.

5. *¿Cuál es tu diccionario electrónico de referencia para trabajar en el área de inglés?*

A. *Wordreference* B. *Google translator* C. *Otro* _____

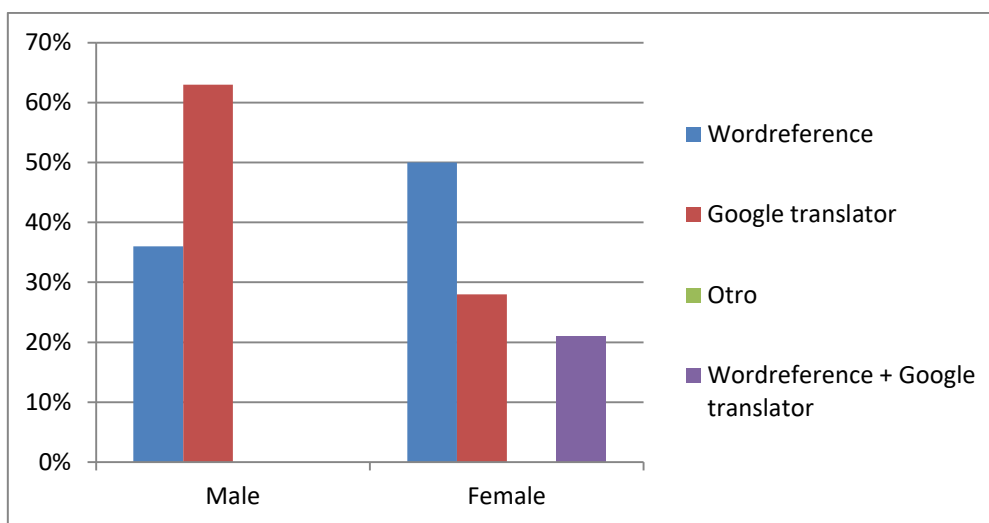


Chart 5. Reference electronic dictionary.

In the case of a reference dictionary, Google translator is the reference in a 63 % of male students, whereas in the case of female, their reference is Wordreference. However, it is necessary to admit that, a 21 % of female participants considered both, their reference dictionary.

6. *¿Usas la transcripción fonética o el audio para saber la pronunciación? SÍ/No*

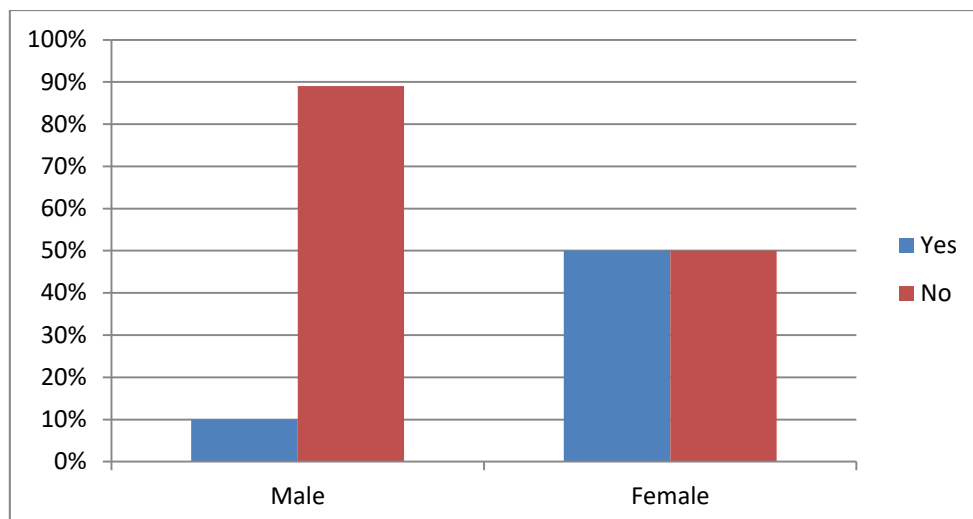


Chart 6. Respondents use of phonological transcription or audio to learn pronunciation.

Considering some of the useful utilities of Internet-based online dictionaries such as the phonological transcription and the audio, it is very relevant to confirm that a barely 10 % of male participants use this transcription. However, in the case of female participants, there is a 50 % of participants who use it.

7. *¿Tienes en cuenta la información gramatical que se da, si es que se da? SÍ / No*

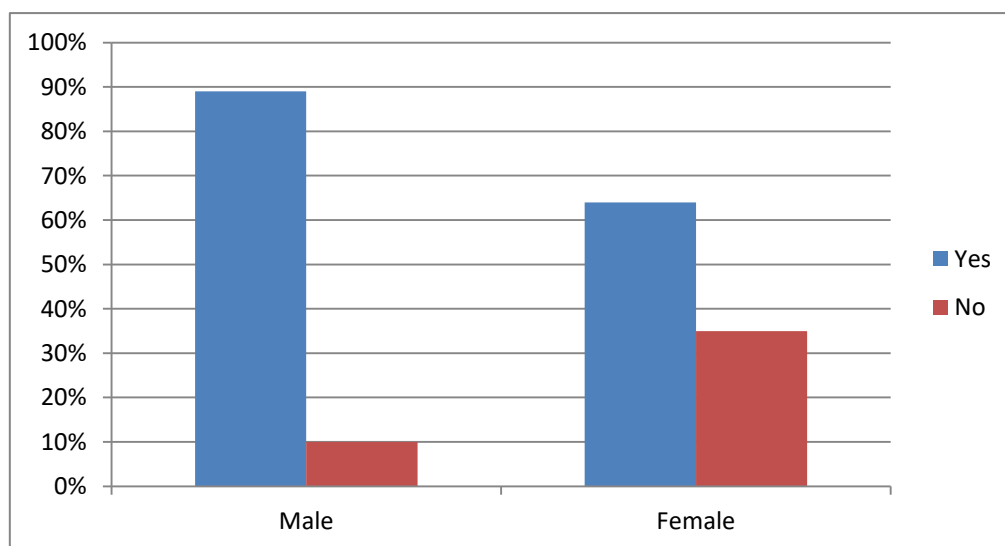


Chart 7. Respondents' consideration of grammar information.

Regarding grammar references provided by online dictionaries, female participants take them into consideration in a higher proportion than male participants. When consulting an online dictionary, an 85 % of female students consider this information, whereas, in male participants, the percentage is lower, a 52 %.

8. ¿Tienes en cuenta los ejemplos que se dan? SÍ / No

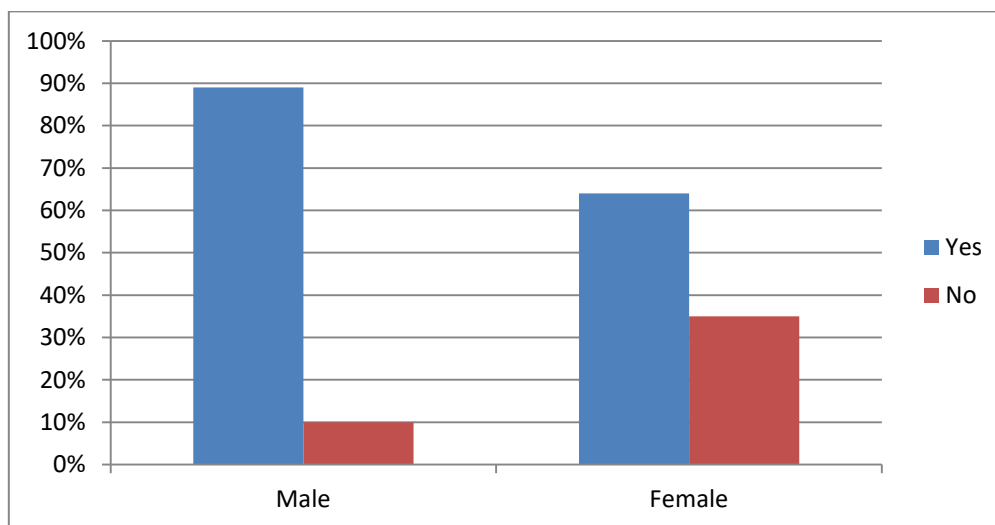


Chart 8. Respondents' consideration of the examples provided.

With respect to the examples provided by this kind of dictionaries, it surprises that male participants consider them in an 89 %, whereas female participants' consideration of these examples stands at a 64 %. This can be considered surprising because, as we are seeing, there is a tendency which could prove that female participants make a more useful use of these devices, in contrast to the use made by male participants. So, in this particular case, that tendency could be interrupted.

9. ¿Te conformas con las primeras definiciones o buscas hasta que encuentras la definición que mejor se adapta a la frase que estás leyendo? Me conformo / Sigo buscando

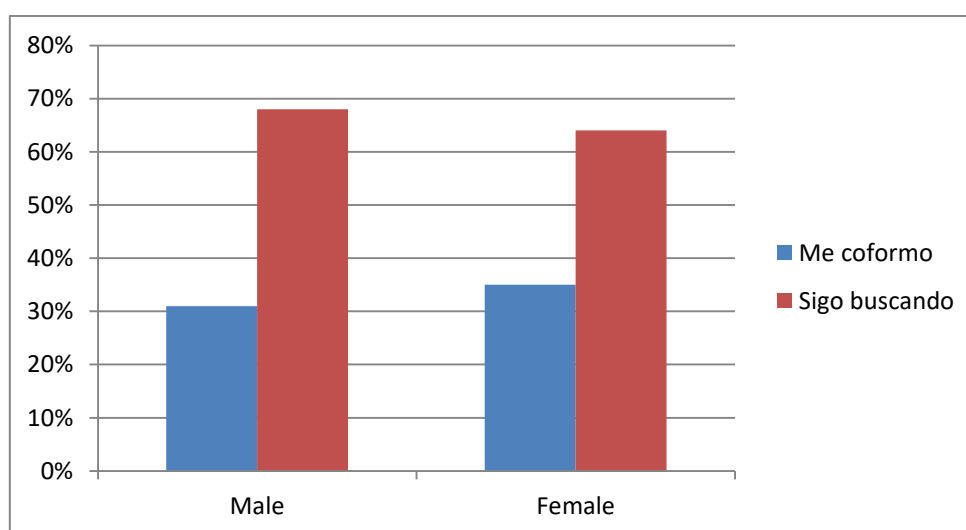


Chart 9. Respondents' attitudes towards the first definitions.

Sometimes, when we are working with a dictionary to get the translation of a term, we just find a few equivalents, so the process becomes something easy. However, it is quite common to find a great amount of possible translations and, usually, this may alter the process and make it harder. In these situations, both males' and females' results are very similar. Around a 30 % of both would resign themselves with the options they have found. However, around a 60 %, slightly higher in the case of male participants, would go on looking up a better and suitable equivalent.

10. ¿Utilizas más de un diccionario electrónico? SÍ / No

¿Cuál/es? _____ , _____

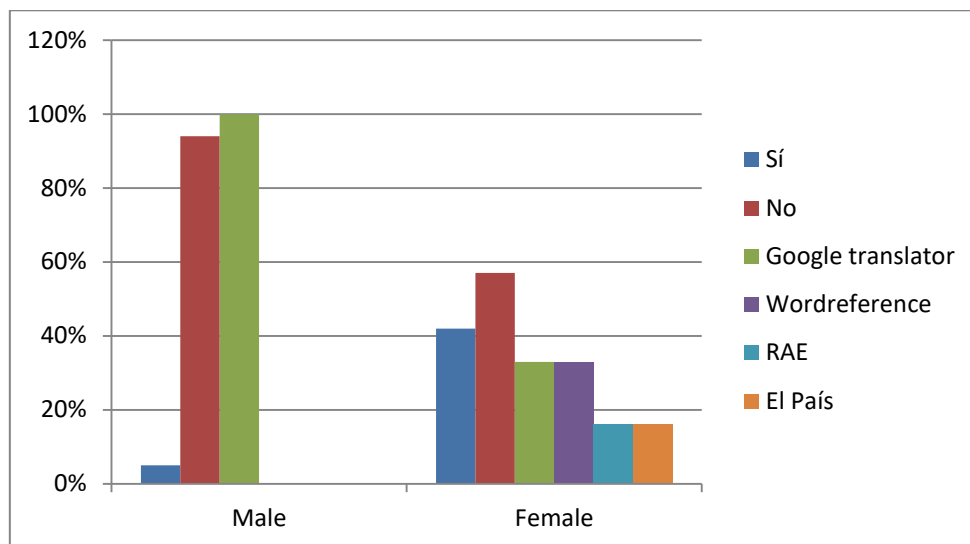


Chart 10. Respondents' use of more than one electronic dictionary.

Considering the previous situation, that is, when we do not find a completely accurate word for a translation or similar activity, many of our participants answered that they would go on looking up a better equivalent, instead of resigning themselves. However, to do so, students would be expected to use more than just one online dictionary. By contrast, the answers to this question do not reveal that. In fact, there is a 94 % of male participants who affirms that does not use more than one online dictionary. And when he does it, he uses Google translator. In the case of female participants, a 42 % uses more than one dictionary. And in their answers, we can observe a broader variety which consists of Google translator, Wordreference, *RAE* dictionary and *El País* translator.

11. *¿Qué haces si no encuentras la definición que resuelve tus dudas en un diccionario electrónico?*

A. *Acudes a otro diccionario* B. *Buscas en Google* C. *Lo dejas*

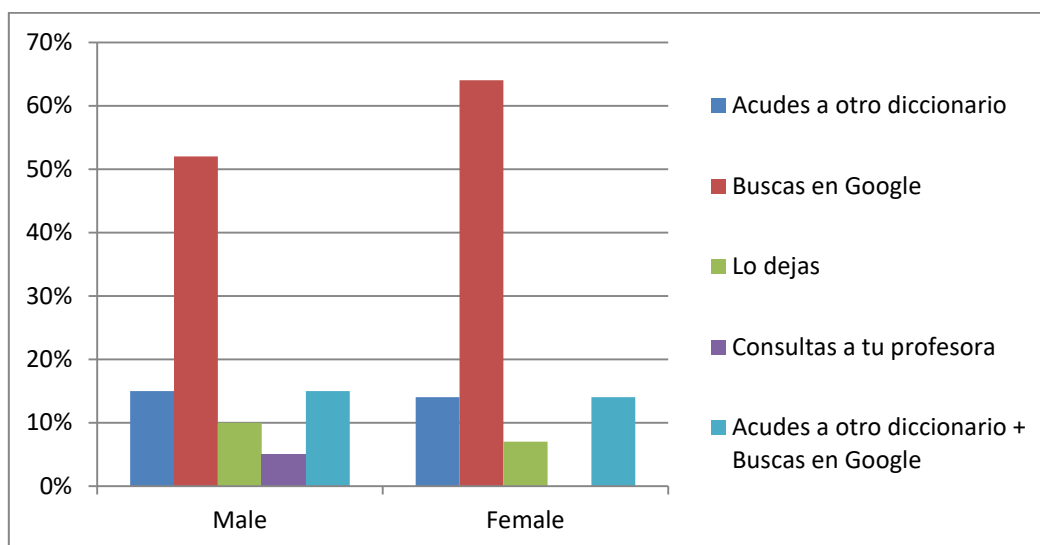


Chart 11. Respondents' actions when they do not find the ideal definition.

Although online dictionaries are as complete as the paper ones, and even many of them are updated frequently, it may happen that we do not find an accurate equivalent for a particular word, maybe because it is very specific or very colloquial. In these situations, the favorite alternative for our students is using Google. In the case of male participants, we find a 52 % and in the case of female, a 64 %. It is important to mention that some of them, a 14 %, chose two options, Google and using another dictionary, as their alternatives at the same time; and also the fact that a male participant added a new option of his own accord.

12. *¿Utilizas el teclado del Smartphone o el micrófono para introducir los términos de búsqueda? Teclado / Micrófono*

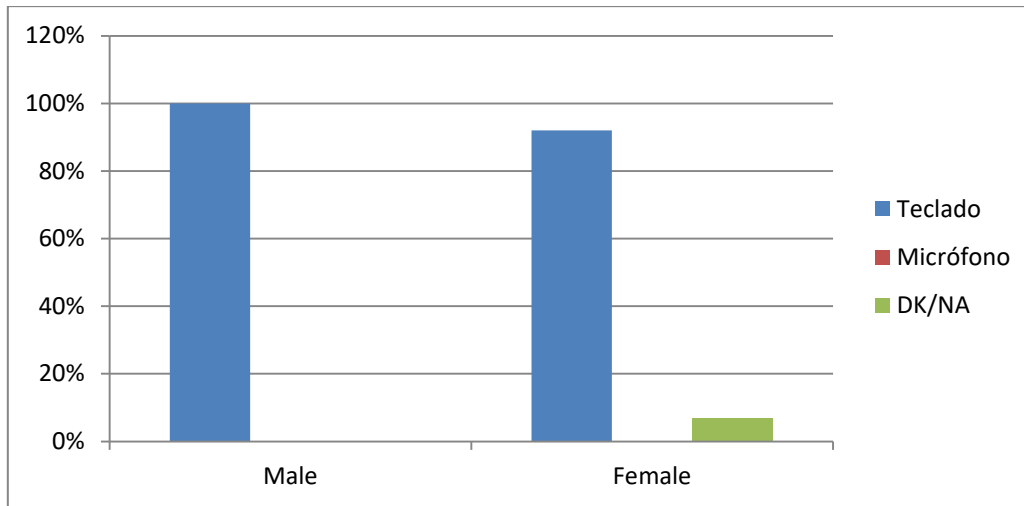


Chart 12. Respondents' use of keyboard or microphone to insert terms.

Concerning the use of the keyboard or the microphone, the results leave no room for doubt. It is majority the use of the keyboard: a 100 % in the case of male participants, and a 92 % in the case of female, because one of the participants did not answer this question.

13. Cuando lees textos impresos, ¿en qué soporte utilizas diccionarios?

- A. Smartphone B. Tablet C. Ordenador
 D. Papel E. No utilizo diccionarios

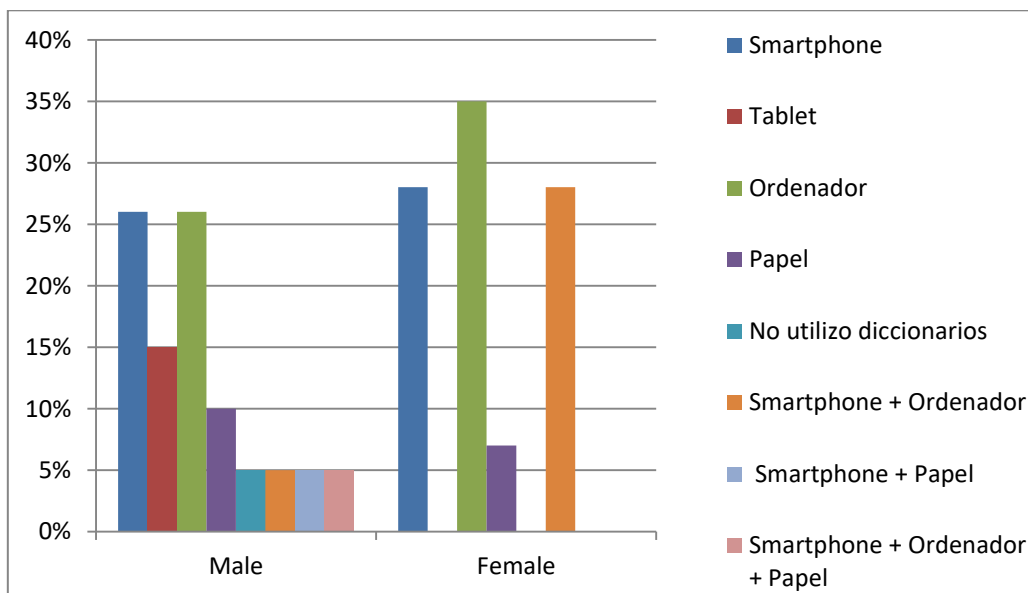


Chart 13. Formats used by respondents when reading printed texts.

When our students were asked about which format they preferred when reading texts in format paper, we can see how the use of the Smartphone and the computer is their favorite option. However, there are some differences. In the case of male participants, there is a wider

variety. Of course, Smartphone and computer play a relevant role (26 % both of them), but it is also true that the use of a dictionary in format paper (10 %) and a tablet (15 %) has certain relevance. However, it is also relevant to mention that several participants established their own combinations of formats with similar results. In the case of female participants, their options are more limited and computer (35 %) and Smartphone (28 %) are the main options for them. Only a 7 % uses a dictionary in format paper, and none of them uses a tablet. By contrast, the combination of smartphone and computer reaches a 28 %.

14. *A modo de resumen, ¿cuáles son las principales ventajas de los diccionarios electrónicos? (Responde de forma breve)*

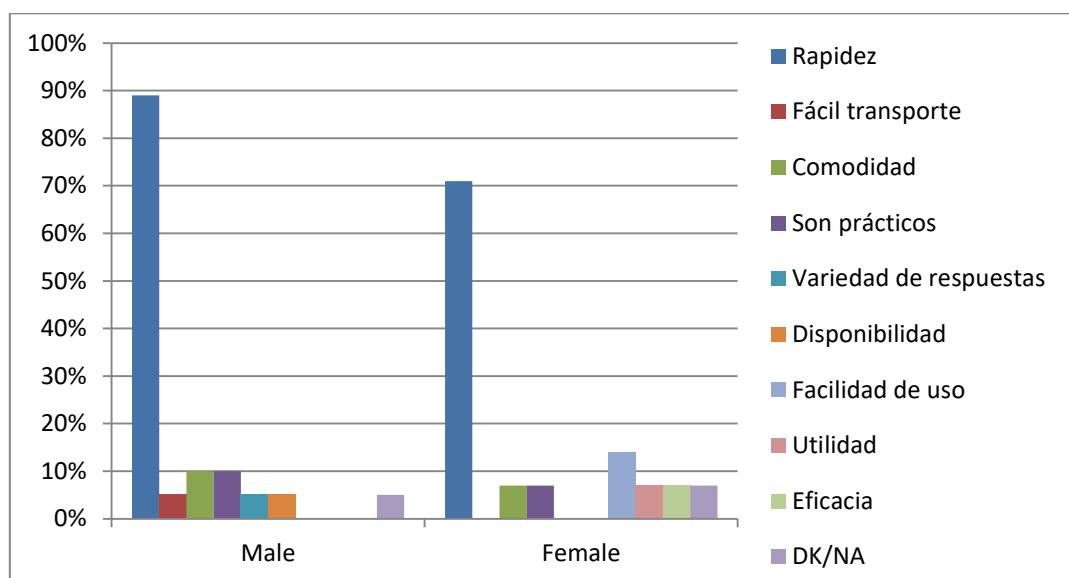


Chart 14. Main advantages of electronic dictionaries.

As we stated from the beginning of our study, speed is one of the main advantages and our participants see it in the same way. In the case of male participants, speed was highlighted as the main advantage of online dictionaries by an 89 % of them. However, there were also other options, although less relevant, such as convenience (10 %) or the fact that they are more practical (10 %) and easy to carry (5 %), among others. In the case of female participants, speed was also the main choice (71 %) and, as it happened with male participants, there are other possible advantages such as ease of use (14 %) and different aspects such as convenience (7 %), utility (7 %) or efficacy (7 %).

15. *¿Crees que hay alguna desventaja en el uso de diccionarios electrónicos? SÍ / No ¿Cuál/ es? (Responde de forma breve)*

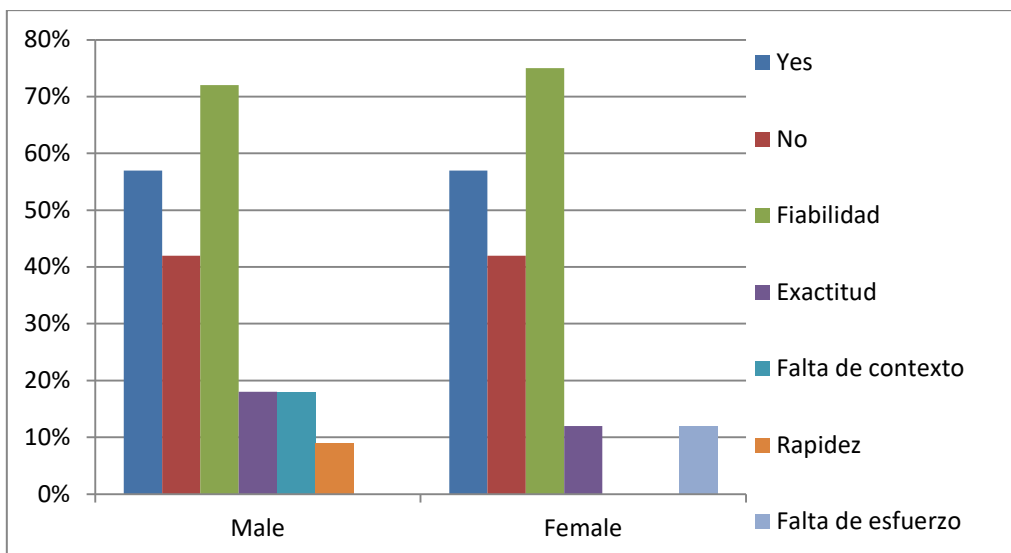


Chart 15. Possible disadvantages of the use of electronic dictionaries.

Finally, it was necessary to consider whether the use of online dictionaries has any disadvantage. From the answers of our participants, we can see in both cases, how male and female participants agree. A 57 % of male and female participants considers that there are disadvantages, whereas a 42 % considers the opposite. When those who agree in the existence of disadvantages are asked about which those disadvantages are, in both cases reliability has a prominent place (72 and 75 % respectively). Accuracy is also taken into consideration by an 18 % of male participants and a 12 % of female. Besides, in the case of male participants, there are other aspects such as the lack of context (18 %) and speed (9 %) which are seen as negative points in the use this type of dictionaries. In the case of women, the lack of effort is also taken into consideration by a 12 %. A lack of effort which agrees on Stirling’s idea (2005) when considering that “the student with the paper dictionary needs to engage with the English word”. In her opinion, “this deeper processing is more likely to fix the lexical item into the student’s brain”.

5. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

From a general point of view, there are several limitations that should be considered. On the one hand, the representativeness of our sample was very limited. As we can see in different studies on the importance of electronic dictionaries such as “Changes in electronic dictionary usage patterns in the age of free online dictionaries: implications for vocabulary acquisition” by Collins (2016) or others studies already mentioned such as Koyama and Takeuchi (2004) or Laufer (2000), the majority of studies were conducted with university students. However, our circumstances and context required other type of representativeness.

Although the first idea was to focus on just one group, the existence of reduced groups made it impossible. In fact, before conducting our investigation with two groups of Bachillerato, we considered the idea of conducting our investigation with a group of ESPA, that is, secondary education for adults. Unfortunately, there were several factors which complicated the development of this idea. Some of these factors were the limited number of participants, the absenteeism among these students, but also some characteristics typical of these groups such as lack of motivation and interest. For this reason, we had to change our minds and conduct our investigation, via questionnaire, in two groups of 2nd year of *Bachillerato*, because, otherwise, we were not able to reach the minimum number of 30 participants. Although we all know that a greater sample of participants would be more beneficial for our investigation.

As we said before, several circumstances made it necessary to focus on a post-compulsory secondary education level. However, this level presented several drawbacks too. As we all know, 2nd year of *Bachillerato* presents always a pretty tight calendar because of the *Selectividad* exam in June, what means that we do not have too much time at our disposal to perform a deeper investigation with different types of instruments. But also, to make matters worse, some of our groups are blended-learning courses, that is, we only have one lesson –of one hour- per week, so it was impossible for us to work with this group to conduct a broader investigation. In fact, one of our main concerns was not to disturb their academic routine longer than strictly necessary.

So we have to admit that if our circumstances had been different, our investigation could have been completed with additional instruments, such as tests or interviews which could have helped to perform a further analysis of the use of online dictionaries in this educational area, and also to prove the possible benefits of these devices in essential aspects such as vocabulary acquisition.

Apart from these, there are other more specific limitations which have to be considered. As you can see, most of the questions were closed, with several options well defined. However, some participants took the liberty of adding some other answers or choosing several at the same time when the original intention was choosing just one. Therefore, these setbacks had to be considered when analyzing the results obtained.

Another limitation we found was that, although the questionnaire was intended to be as clear and understandable as possible – taking into consideration that it was formulated in Spanish- it seems evident that some of our students’ reading comprehension presents certain weaknesses, because there is a possibility that some of them did not understand correctly some the questions. Otherwise, it is confusing to understand why a student would say that he/she does not use any other electronic dictionary, but when he/she is asked which one, he/she provides several examples. In the same question, another student affirms that he/she uses other electronic dictionaries, but when he/she is expected to name those other examples, answer the same one he/ she commented before. For this reason, the interpretation of this kind of answers is an important limitation of the study, because it may lead to confusion since it is very difficult to interpret such contradictory answers.

Finally we could consider that the homogenous ages -with an exception of one older students- of our participants limit our study in the sense that variables such as the age cannot be taken into consideration as a relevant factor affecting the pattern of use of online dictionaries in this kind of post-compulsory studies.

6. LINES OF FUTURE RESEARCH

Once our study has been completed, several ideas come to our minds in order to develop this line of study and go further in this kind of research.

As we have mentioned several times along our study, different investigations, mainly in Asian countries, suggest that the use of online dictionaries seem to be linked to the acquisition of vocabulary. For this reason, it would be interesting to see if the use of these devices has a positive effect on the acquisition of vocabulary in our local and educational context, comparing it with the effect of paper dictionary as Laufer (2000) tried to prove with two groups of advanced university learners of EFL in Israel.

To do so, it would be necessary to work with a more numerically representative sample. Since we work in secondary education, the alternatives to enlarge our sample are limited. For this reason, one of the possible solutions to this limitation could be the involvement of different

academic levels such as, for instance, first and second year of *Bachillerato* as well as higher levels of Compulsory Secondary Education -mainly third and fourth year of CSE. The wider our sample is, the better our options of triangulations of variables are. So this would let us consider more enriching variables in order to obtain more accurate results and conclusions which could play a relevant role in the learning process.

As Atipat Boonmoh (2012) considers in the study “E-dictionary use under the spotlight: students’ use of pocket electronic dictionaries for writing”, the process of consulting a dictionary is private and it is very difficult to analyse “what people actually do when they use a dictionary without, to a certain degree, interfering with their natural behavior”. Observation can be a good strategy to test the way students use their dictionaries in a natural setting, however, although redundant, “only observable behaviors can be observed”. So, if we expect to go deeper into this issue, and analyse the mental processes that happen when using an online dictionary, some verbalization is necessary, although this verbalization “will inevitably disrupt the subjects’ working processes”.

For this reason, some monitoring would be a pivotal complement to obtain more accurate data during the process of looking up words in electronic dictionaries both in a computer or a smartphone. So, some particular facilities such as well-equipped ICT rooms would be fundamental, in order to detail the steps followed by our participants when working with online dictionaries.

However, the lack of time when working with these groups will always be a handicap, so new formulae should be discussed in order to facilitate a further investigation without disturbing the usual development of their academic routine. However, due to the fact that this investigation can have positive implications in aspects such as the vocabulary acquisition process, it would be a good idea to integrate this investigation in their studies as motivating and appealing activities or tasks which may become part of their teaching and learning process.

Interviews could be lay out before and after the use of these dictionaries in order to compile the opinions and suggestions of the participants. Also, different tests should be provided to

check whether the use of dictionaries –especially online dictionaries which are the core idea in our investigation- has made a real difference in the vocabulary acquisition process.

7. CONCLUSION

Based on our perspective as teachers, the main goal of the current study was to determine to what extent students make use of online dictionaries in the English as a Foreign Language classroom, which online dictionary they prefer, how they use them, but also whether they make the most out of these devices. Studies on the effects on the use of online dictionaries are not something uncommon (Laufer and Hill, 2000; Koyama and Takeuchi, 2004), however, in a context such as our own, this kind of investigations are not as frequent as desired.

As we saw in the Results section, we can affirm that, this study has found that generally there are not so relevant differences concerning the use male and female students make of online dictionaries. In fact, the results were pretty similar in most of the questions that were formulated in our mixed-questionnaire.

When considering the necessity of a study of this kind, one of the first thoughts that came to our minds was the dependence students have on Google translator. This theory, or thought, versed on the idea that the reference our students have nowadays regarding online dictionaries is pretty limited and focuses mainly on Google translator. However, we cannot deny that other alternatives are more and more taken into consideration such as Wordreference, although most of our students admitted that they did not have any dictionary application on their mobile phones. Another interesting conclusion is that our students do not see the necessity of using a monolingual dictionary.

From a general point of view, students use this type of dictionaries with a similar frequency, although they still resort to paper dictionaries if they need to. However, it seems that they do not take advantage of the multiple facilities online dictionaries offer such as phonological transcriptions and audios. By contrast, grammar references and different usage examples provided by online dictionaries seem to be useful in our students' opinion.

Anyway, the use of a dictionary, online in this case, is not just a matter of how we use it, but also a matter of when we use it. Sometimes, the process is very easy and users find what they are looking for in just one click. Nevertheless, it may happen that they do not find that word or expression that they are looking up, so two options come to their minds: giving up or going on. In these situations, both groups of students seem to have a clear answer, which is going on looking that accurate word or expression. To do so, it is important to have alternative dictionaries to make us of; however, the duopoly Google translator vs Wordreference are seen as the only alternatives.

This new era of online dictionaries has some peculiarities. One of them, for example, is the option that users have to choose between the keyboard and the microphone to enter the word they are looking up. However, students seem more traditional and the option of using the microphone seems to be ignored.

In general, we can conclude that online dictionaries are a reality and, of course, are here to stay. And when considering different formats, our students know which format suits better their necessities and their characteristics. Computer and Smartphone are the majority format, although paper dictionaries are still seen as a useful format, at least, to be used at home.

In any case, online dictionaries have pros and cons, and our students know them. As we all may assume, speed is the main advantage when talking about online dictionaries. In fact, as we mentioned previously, there are studies such as “An experiment using electronic dictionaries with EFL students” by Robert Weschler and Chris Pitts which stated that students could look up words about a 23 % faster with an electronic dictionary. Besides, there are also other positive aspects such as convenience, utility and efficacy. However, there are also some disadvantages as Zheng and Wang suggested in their article “The use of electronic dictionaries in EFL Classroom”. In our students’ opinion, reliability is the main disadvantage, since many of them do not trust completely this kind of devices. Other possible disadvantages are the lack of a context which helps them screen possible answers, as well as a lack of effort which, following the ideas of Stirling (2005) may mean that the vocabulary acquisition process will not be as successful as expected.

As we can observe, the evidence of this study suggests that online dictionaries are a real tool in the English as a Foreign Language classroom; however it seems pivotal to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of their working in order to let our students make the most out of them. We hope that this research will serve as a base for future studies regarding this issue to provide our students with as many useful tools as possible to facilitate their learning process, paying special attention on the vocabulary acquisition process as several authors have already highlighted (Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus, 1996).

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