Attitudes towards dictionary use: A case study of university students studying languages for business

BALÁZS FAJT1, KATALIN P. MÁRKUS2 and MÁTYÁS BÁNHEGYI1*

1 Faculty of Finance and Accountancy, Budapest Business University, Budapest, Hungary
2 Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT

Due to the spread of the communicative language teaching method language learners were often encouraged not to use a dictionary but rather infer the meaning of a word or phrase from its context. Proper dictionary use, however, is now seen as an important element of autonomous and life-long language learning. The present research used the quantitative research paradigm and a self-prepared questionnaire (n = 925) to investigate attitudes towards dictionary use in the case of university students studying languages for business. The study investigated participants’ willingness to use and pay for dictionaries and their willingness to read usage guides in dictionaries. Our results show that participants typically use a dictionary if they do not know the meaning of a word or phrase, but are reluctant to buy a dictionary and are likewise unwilling to read the information guides in dictionaries. Our results also reveal that willingness to pay for dictionaries is positively influenced by willingness to use dictionaries, willingness to read usage guides in dictionaries and language learners’ age.

KEYWORDS
languages for specific purposes, dictionary use, higher education, lexicography, second language (L2) teaching and education

INTRODUCTION

The use of dictionaries is of paramount importance in foreign language learning as dictionaries are a tool that helps language learners to understand unfamiliar words, phrases and thus sentences and texts (Boulton & De Cock, 2017; Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023; Nied Curcio, 2022). The understanding of words, phrases and linguistic structures provides a basis for the acquisition of a foreign language, and it also offers a basis for passive foreign language learning. Dictionaries (typically bilingual ones) are not only used for comprehension, but often also for translation into a foreign language (Fuertes-Olivera, 2013; P. Márkus, 2023), which thus support active language use.

On the other hand, bilingual dictionaries do not only contain headwords and their equivalents in target and source languages but also provide precise definitions of the meanings, stylistic values, conjugations, correct pronunciation and usage of headwords, as well as offer example sentences as a kind of illustration to help foreign language learners in their communication (Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márkus, 2021). By using the dictionary correctly, vocabulary can be expanded and linguistic awareness and confidence can be increased, which thus enable second language (L2) learners to effectively communicate in a foreign language (Carduner, 2003; Gavriilidou, 2013; Kosem, Lew, Müller-Spitzer, Ribeiro Silveira, & Wolfer,
A dictionary is therefore not only a list of words and phrases in two languages, but also a valuable tool in the hands of language learners, which can contribute to the autonomous and lifelong development of foreign language skills (Leaney, 2007; P. Márkus, 2023).

Dictionary use is particularly important in our globalised world: globalisation contributes to the development of communication and cooperation across different languages and cultures both at and out of work, and dictionary use may function as means of one’s language development. In the case of business professionals, for example, dictionaries can help overcome linguistic communication barriers and obstacles, thus enabling business people to communicate effectively in foreign languages (cf. Todorova & Todorova, 2018). In addition, new vocabulary is created on a daily basis as science and technology evolve. Furthermore, print and online dictionaries allow professionals to easily access and understand international news, articles, websites and literature, which is essential for the continuous development of one’s expertise. In this context, it is important to underline that dictionary use is also a key element in the process of continuous learning and autonomous lifelong learning (Leaney, 2007; Lew, 2016). In the face of this backdrop and based on the authors’ classroom experience, the current paper explores the reasons why business students fail to use dictionaries to their full potential.

Through a research project on the attitudes of business students towards dictionary use, our study, on the one hand, aims to underscore the importance of dictionaries from the above-described perspectives, and, on the other hand, explores students’ attitudes to dictionary use along four aspects: whether the university students examined are willing to use dictionaries, whether they are willing to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries, whether they consult the usage guides of dictionaries and what influences their willingness to buy dictionaries or subscribe to digital dictionaries. We considered these questions important for getting a diagnostic picture of current dictionary use habits among the students examined. As for potential benefits, it is hoped that the results of this project generate data that can be used for adapting university syllabi and curricula so that they can better meet the needs of students of business studies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It is widely accepted that those who do not have the language learning skills or lifelong L2 learning competences will not be able to accomplish their goals in the labour market, succeed or keep up with the development of their profession (Dash, Satpathy, & Dash, 2020; Kostikova, Holubnychá, Girich, & Movmyga, 2021; Leaney, 2007; P. Márkus, 2020; Tóth, P. Márkus, & Pódor, 2022; Webb & Nation, 2017). This is particularly true when working in a multilingual environment or in situations where working in an L2 requires a solid and reliable knowledge of L2. In addition, globalisation has led to the development of even closer international ties in business and economic life than before, which has given rise to a situation where maintaining and continuously improving language skills are essential for keeping one’s job in multinational environments (Cambridge English, 2016; Nied Curcio, 2022). For this purpose, one of the means of language development is the dictionary and its effective use: the dictionary can facilitate the development of confident and adequate language skills, function as a knowledge repository and reference, as well as provide up-to-date (professional) knowledge (Campoy-Cubillo, 2015; Rundell, 2015).

Acknowledging this potential use of the dictionary, the role of lexicography as a discipline was recognised in the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe in the 1970s (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1975). In historical perspectives, the document stressed the importance of learning foreign languages and studying foreign cultures as an effective means of strengthening international relations: this process can be facilitated by lexicographers by involving an increasing number of languages in their work and by compiling new (specialised) dictionaries (Murath, 2020). Today, dictionaries are undergoing significant changes: lexicographic work is greatly accelerated by the possibilities offered by computers and the Internet, which efficiently help to meet growing linguistic needs (for a brief overview, see P. Márkus, 2019a).

The Helsinki Final Act also focuses on the prominent role between education and dictionary use (Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, 1975): by now dictionary use in education is already supported by a variety of new dictionary types and ancillary reference materials (Fajt, 2022; Fóris, 2018; Leaney, 2007; Lew, 2004; Lew & De Schryver, 2014; Nesi, 2014; P. Márkus, 2019a). In addition, the importance of reference works is also recognised by the Council of Europe in its language policy, which emphasises multilingualism and lifelong learning, and stresses that the use of dictionaries and appropriate search strategies are essential in today’s digital world (Council of Europe, 2018).

Dictionaries and other reference works constantly change in terms of their form and medium, and their role for society and individuals is growing thanks to the increasingly convenient access they offer (Bae & Nesi, 2014; Lew & De Schryver, 2014; Rundell, 2015), and their widespread use.

In response to this growing demand, the range of lexicographic resources is becoming more and more diverse, which entails the emergence of less rigorous and less reliable publications. Consequently, the ability to recognise high-quality dictionary resources, a critical approach to dictionaries and the ability to select the most appropriate sources for a given task on the basis of predefined criteria are particularly important today (Pintér, 2019). In several European countries, including Hungary, documents regulating education refer to the importance of appropriate dictionary use (Fajt & P. Márkus, 2023; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márkus, 2020).

In the 2000s, the research on dictionary use also gained momentum, and this clearly supports and foregrounds the importance of effective dictionary use in the process of
L2 acquisition and lifelong learning (for a brief overview of the national and international research on dictionary use, see e.g.: Atkins, 2015; Dringó-Horváth, P. Márikus, & Fájt, 2021; Hartmann, 1999; Lew, 2004; P. Márikus et al., 2023). One Hungarian initiative (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2021; P. Márikus et al., 2023) should be highlighted among the research projects on dictionary use, as it seems to be the most prominent from the point of view of our research. The project investigates the dictionary use of graduates in English and German as well as their attitudes towards teaching and learning dictionary skills in the classroom. Based on the findings, the project members plan to design a core “dictionary skills” module (with teaching aids and handbooks), which could be incorporated into a variety of courses in tertiary education. The initiative will be of crucial importance for the teaching of dictionary skills in the future.

A practical approach to dictionaries is also observable in users. L2 learners are willing to use those dictionaries that are user-friendly in their eyes and offer the most important learner information (e.g. meaning or spelling) in an easy-to-navigate format (Hartmann, 1999; Nied Curcio, 2022; Quirk, 1973; Sviķe, 2022; Tomaszczyk, 1979). Typically, these days users wish to find dictionary information in a speedy and effortless way (Campoy-Cubillo, 2015; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márikus & Dringó-Horváth, 2023). This probably explains why some L2 learners, in addition to dictionaries, use the Internet for looking up words (Müller-Spitzer et al., 2018; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márikus & Dringó-Horváth, 2023).

The appropriate use of dictionaries and lexicographic resources forms an essential part of L2 learning strategies. This, however, is typically only marginally addressed in L2 education, especially in the case of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) (Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márikus, 2020; P. Márikus & Dringó-Horváth, 2023). When trying to discover the historical root cause of this phenomenon, we can see that while the bilingual dictionary has always been a frequently used tool in the grammar-translation method, other methodological approaches of language teaching – among others the audiolingual and audiovisual methods – avoided the use of bilingual dictionaries (Cook, 2019). In addition, when L2 learners are taught using the communicative method, they are often encouraged not to use bilingual dictionaries (Adamska-Salaciak & Kerner, 2016) as these methodological views hold that bilingual dictionary use may potentially hinder proper communication in L2 (Augustyn, 2013; Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Nevertheless, research conducted so far (Augustyn, 2013; Kosem et al., 2019; Snell-Hornbys, 1987; Tono, 2001) shows that the majority of people use dictionaries for communicating in an L2, for finding answers to language-related questions in real social contexts or in real life situations. On the other hand, due to the “illicit” role of dictionary use, L2 learners typically learn how to use these dictionary resources in an autodidactic way. In fact, there appears to be no practical and structured instruction in dictionary use: dictionary use is not systematically integrated into foreign language lessons, only few textbooks contain activities on dictionary use, very few universities offer lexicography courses for language teachers, and, as a result, users mostly rely on their intuition when searching for information in dictionaries (El-Sayed & Siddiek, 2014; Tremblay, Plante, & Fréchette-Simard, 2018, 2023; the following studies discuss the state of dictionary culture and dictionary didactics in Hungary by analysing educational documents: Fórísz, 2004; P. Márikus, 2020; P. Márikus et al., 2023).

At the turn of the millennium, the role of dictionary use in L2 teaching began to become more prominent with the publication of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in 2001 (see Common European Framework – Hungarian version 2002, n.d.). This document emphasizes that the aim of foreign language teaching is not only to develop linguistic competence but also to enable effective language use in foreign language contexts, for which a dictionary is essential. Thus, the role of reference works in education seems to have been increasing, and we can also find suggestions and guidelines for dictionary use in official educational materials (e.g. the Hungarian National Curriculum) (Fórísz, 2004; P. Márikus, 2020; Nied Curcio, 2022).

As extensive linguistic information is available online, L2 learners are not very keen on paying for dictionary use. In the case of paid and free dictionaries, it should be noted that many reputable publishers provide free access to their online monolingual dictionaries, however, in Hungary, reliable online bilingual dictionaries are only available by subscription or with a code available in a print dictionary (their free online versions provide only the most basic lexicographic information, e.g. meaning without grammatical information). Research has identified that one reason why learners are less likely to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries is that they are not prepared enough to read usage guides (which contains a detailed description of all the data in the dictionary) and thus are less likely to know why a dictionary may be useful for them or why a dictionary is more reliable than the other (Fájt, Bánhegyi, & Márikus, 2023). Foreign language teachers and learners need to be aware of all the differences between free and paid dictionaries. In order to make an informed decision, accurate information is of utmost importance. To do this, the dictionary user needs to read the usage guide and be informed about the structure of the dictionary and the characteristics of the information it includes (Atkins & Varantola, 1997; Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023; P. Márikus et al., 2023; Svensén, 2009; Vrbinc, Vrbinc, & Farina, 2023). Without having read the guide to the dictionary, there may be obstacles to students’ understanding and making use of dictionary information. According to earlier studies, many users have problems interpreting the signs and abbreviations or grammatical information in dictionaries; however, finding the correct meaning or expression can be equally challenging if the user does not read the information in the usage guide (Atkins & Varantola, 1997; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márikus & Dringó-Horváth, 2023; Svensén, 2009).

Although there are many positive changes today, the role of dictionaries and reference works in L2 teaching is still limited (Fórísz, 2018; P. Márikus, 2021). Some educators argue
that the in-class teaching of dictionary use is too time-consuming, because dictionary use is not a language learning activity and can be done individually, therefore it disturbs the L2 classroom learning experience (e.g. Augustyn, 2013; P. Márkus & Fajt, 2021). This is why dictionary use is mostly done outside the classroom, when learners are left on their own devices with no available help by the teacher. This situation unfortunately prevents the in-depth teaching of basic practical skills and search strategies for using dictionaries (P. Márkus, 2019b).

For this reason, to support students’ lifelong learning skill development, teachers should encourage students to use dictionaries, as these study tools foster learner autonomy. A good dictionary may provide hundreds of hours of self-guided study for pupils if they know how to utilise it properly. For effective and successful dictionary use, study skills and reference skills are essential so dictionary use should be made an integral part of language lessons. Some of the keywords for the inclusion of dictionary use in language classes are: recognition; observation; and comparison. When designing a dictionary use task, it is critical to emphasise the process of recognition by using exercises that focus on selecting the correct data (e.g. selecting the correct sense in a polysemous entry) or on the interpretation of the data within the entry (e.g. interpreting signs and symbols). Activities describing the structure of the entry and interpreting the dictionary’s instructions for use reinforce the process of observation. Reading the external texts of dictionaries can be a significant aid to successful use, especially if the use of the dictionary is required for complex tasks (e.g. error correction). The process of comparison is developed, for instance, when students compare a dictionary entry from a digital dictionary with a print edition as a comparison task (it is not possible to provide a complete picture of the methodology within the scope of this study; see more about teaching dictionary skills: Gonda, 2009; P. Márkus, 2023; P. Márkus & Pódor, 2021). Consequently, the role of the teacher in educating students about dictionary use as part of the L2 learning process is fundamental. Researchers (e.g. El-Sayed & Siddique, 2014; Tremblay et al., 2018, 2023) observed that teachers’ restricted use of dictionaries in the classroom is usually supported by their students’ negative attitudes towards this learning tool. On the basis of these results, it may be assumed that positive attitudes towards reference materials would influence teachers’ opinions of teaching dictionary skills in the classroom. This, in turn, will have a positive effect on attitudes towards dictionary use: students will be more willing to use dictionaries in different contexts and will be more likely to spend money on different types of quality dictionaries.

The importance of attitudes towards dictionary use is underscored by Nesi’s (1999) work on dictionary skills, in which she outlines all the practical knowledge and skills needed to use dictionaries effectively. In her taxonomy, she divides dictionary skills into six categories: “before study”; “before dictionary consultation”; “locating entry information”; “interpreting entry information”; “recording entry information”; and “understanding lexicographical issues” (Nesi, 1999, pp. 53–54). In Nesi’s taxonomy, the first stage (“before study”) involves two prominent skills: 1. understanding of the typology of dictionaries and selecting one (or more) dictionary (dictionaries) for use or purchase; and 2. understanding of the types of information that can be found in dictionaries and other reference works. These skills are essential for the effective and successful use of a dictionary, and it is assumed that, in possession of these skills, dictionary users are aware of the range of available dictionaries, are then able to select the dictionaries that are appropriate for them and are willing to purchase the publications in question. Having read the instructions for correct use before purchase, dictionary users will know what type of information can be accessed in dictionaries. Based on the above considerations, it can be concluded that reading the usage guides and being willing to pay for print dictionaries or online dictionary use are major contributors to appropriate and effective dictionary use.

RESEARCH METHODS

Based on the discussion in the previous section, we may state that the appropriate use of dictionaries and lexicographic resources should form an essential part of L2 learning strategies. In this paper, therefore, our objective was to investigate the dictionary use habits and attitudes towards dictionaries among students studying English for Special Purposes (ESP). This group of learners would benefit from using dictionaries and technical dictionaries for looking up technical terms and other vocabulary items as they are likely to be exposed to foreign language input on a daily basis. In line with these objectives, the following research questions and corresponding sub-questions were formulated:

RQ1: What characterises the attitudes towards dictionary use of students studying ESP?

RQ1.1: To what extent are participants willing to use a dictionary?

RQ1.2: To what extent are participants willing to buy a dictionary or to subscribe to a digital dictionary?

RQ1.3: How extensively do participants consult the usage guides of dictionaries?

RQ1.4: What influences participants’ willingness to buy a dictionary or to subscribe to a digital dictionary?

To answer the above research questions, we collected data through a large-scale quantitative survey. For the purposes of the current paper, only relevant data and results from this bigger research project are presented herein.

Participants

A total of 925 university students studying ESP at a business programme of a Budapest-based university were recruited for this study using convenience sampling. The gender distribution of the sample was relatively equal with 54% of the sample being male (n = 501) and 46% female (n = 424). The average age of the respondents was
20.78 years (SD = 2.07): the youngest respondent was 18, and the oldest 43 years old. At the time of data collection, the participants had been studying English for an average of 10.47 years (SD = 3.50). Of the three compulsory, consecutive ESP courses offered by the university at the time of the survey, 31.7% (n = 293) were taking the first, 26.7% (n = 247) the second and 41.6% (n = 385) the third semester ESP course. In total, 81.2% (n = 751) of the participants had at least a B2 level foreign language examination certificate in English.

RESULTS

Before carrying out any statistical analyses, we checked the reliability of our three scales by calculating the Cronbach's alpha coefficients. As can be seen in Table 1, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of all scales exceed the minimum value (0.70) defined in the literature (Cohen et al., 2018), which means that our scales can measure reliably. This allowed us to perform further statistical analyses on the database.

After checking the reliability of the scales, we calculated their mean and their associated standard deviation. Among the means for the three scales, the means for willingness to use dictionaries is relatively high (M = 3.91), but the means for willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries and willingness to consult usage guides in dictionaries are low (M = 2.81 and 2.47).

In the second stage of the analysis, we sought to explore the relationships among scales and background variables by running correlation analyses. These results are presented in Table 2, in which only statistically significant correlation values are reported.

Table 2 shows that there are only few significant relationships among variables. Furthermore, where there is a significant relationship, this relationship can be deemed negligible based on Hinkle et al.’s (2003) recommendations. In these cases, correlation coefficients do not exceed 0.30.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place in autumn 2022 at a Budapest-based higher education institution offering business programmes. The completion of the questionnaire was voluntary and anonymous. The collected data were coded and the analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 28.0 statistical analysis software. During the analysis, the reliability of the scales was checked by calculating their Cronbach's alpha coefficients, and then the mean scores (M) and their standard deviations (SD) were calculated for each scale. Pearson correlation analyses and linear regression (at the p < 0.05 level of statistical significance) were then used to explore the potential relationships among variables.
However, our data reveal a number of novel results, which – to our knowledge – have not been investigated in the Hungarian context before. In terms of RQ1.1 in regard to willingness to use a dictionary, it can be established that the examined three attitude scales correlate: the highest correlation is found between willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries and willingness to use dictionaries. The correlations between the other dictionary use scales – although statistically significant and detectable – show only a negligible relationship.

These results show that willingness to use a dictionary, willingness to read the usage guides in a dictionary and the age of the participants positively influence willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries: the more willingly one uses a dictionary, the more willingly one reads the usage guides in a dictionary; and the older one is, the more likely they are to buy a dictionary.

As for RQ1.2 concerning willingness to buy or subscribe to a dictionary, the results have borne out that there is also a negligible – but significant – correlation between willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries, the number of foreign language exam certificates obtained and willingness to use dictionaries. It can be established that the more B2 foreign language exam certificates a person possesses, the more willing they are to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries and the more willing they are to use dictionaries.

In the final stage of the analysis, we used linear regression to examine which of our variables might have an impact on participants’ willingness to buy or subscribe to dictionaries (Table 3).

The data presented in Table 3 show that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries is explained by a total of three variables and the explanatory power of the regression model is 9% ($R^2 = 0.09$), which means that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries is determined by these three variables to a small extent (only by 9%).

With respect to RQ1.3 relating to consulting the usage guides of dictionaries, a new finding is that there is a positive correlation, even if only to a negligible extent, between willingness to consult usage guides in dictionaries and the number of language courses completed. This means that the more language courses a student has completed out of the three compulsory university language courses, the more easily and will be able to produce better-quality lists (Campoy-Cubillo, 2015).

Table 3. Variables determining willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>$B$</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$t$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Willingness to use dictionaries</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>7.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Willingness to consult the usage guides of dictionaries</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>5.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Age</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>2.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F$ for change in $R^2$</td>
<td>27.20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

This discussion centres around three main topics: willingness to use dictionaries, reading the usage guides of dictionaries, and willingness to buy a dictionary. The willingness of our participants to use dictionaries is relatively high, which is a positive sign from the perspective of L2 learning. However, this willingness is not as high as the one discovered in a previous study on L2 students’ and L2 teachers’ willingness to use dictionaries (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2021; P. Márkus et al., 2023). In our opinion, this can be explained by the fact that students in business education typically have an inherently lower level of awareness of their L1 and L2, and that the focus of their studies is not necessarily on deeper acquisition of one (or more) L2(s): for them, language is mostly a means rather than an end (Einhorn, 2015). However, our findings provide important insights into the attitudes of business education students towards dictionary usage, and thus, add value exploring dictionary use habits in a context not thoroughly examined in previous studies. In addition, by focusing on business education students, our findings offer implications for curriculum design and language learning strategies within business programs in higher education. The finding that these students view language as a means rather than an end challenges educators and program designers to rethink how language skills are taught and integrated into business education.

The number of language courses taken is related to the extent to which participants read the usage guides in dictionaries: the more courses students have taken, the more likely they are to read the usage guides. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that at the examined university there is a strong focus on teaching students how to become autonomous language learners (e.g. through using the portfolio method, using collaborative tasks, etc.) (Bánhegyi & Fajt, 2023), which also includes teaching appropriate dictionary use. For example, within the framework of the portfolio method, students in their ESP courses prepare a terminology list with English definitions and Hungarian equivalents. Students who are more familiar with the autonomous use of dictionaries and can rely on more extensive dictionary skills will be able to complete this task more easily and will be able to produce better-quality lists (Campoy-Cubillo, 2015).

The number of foreign language exam certificates obtained is also related to whether our participants read the usage guides in dictionaries and whether they are generally willing to use dictionaries. This finding is not surprising in the light of previous research results: Hungarian students are rather exam-oriented (Einhorn, 2015, 2022; Fajt, Bánhegyi, Vékási, & Cséppentő, 2022; Fekete & Csépes, 2019; Öveges & Csízér, 2018) and this seems to impact their dictionary use habits. In connection with this, it is important to note that before COVID-19 typically only paper dictionaries were used in L2 exam centres, so the availability of a dictionary and the ability to use a paper dictionary were crucial, as one of the keys to a successful exam could be the correct use of a
dictionary. In this situation, so dictionary instruction was often only introduced right before the exam as part of the preparation for the exam (Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márkus, 2019b). By revealing a connection between students’ engagement with dictionary usage guides, their general willingness to use dictionaries, and their success in obtaining language certifications, our study offers compelling insights into the exam-oriented nature of Hungarian language education. This work enriches the existing body of literature by contextualising the shift from paper to digital dictionaries in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on language learning strategies. Furthermore, our findings highlight the critical role of timely dictionary instruction in exam preparation, providing a deeper understanding of pedagogical practices that could enhance exam success.

Our results on willingness to buy a dictionary and willingness to read through usage guides are in line with the results of previous research (Dringó-Horváth et al., 2021; P. Márkus et al., 2023), which also found that participants’ willingness to buy a dictionary and read through usage guides were largely low for these two variables. In the light of this, it would be worthwhile to follow well-established practices in L2 (teaching) programmes (cf. P. Márkus, 2022; P. Márkus & Pödör, 2021; Tóth et al., 2022): the principle of gradualism should be applied in the field of L2 teaching in order to enhance conscious (and appropriate) dictionary use through increasing learners’ willingness to buy dictionaries and to read through usage guides. At the beginning of their L2 learning stage, the role of printed dictionaries is more important, as they allow students to learn how to use a dictionary, reveal the wealth of information that can be retrieved from dictionaries and will contribute to teaching students how to find specific information in dictionaries. If students are not introduced to quality (printed) dictionaries at the beginning of their L2 learning careers, they risk failing to develop their ability to select a reliable dictionary source from the vast number of search hits on the Internet and will not be able to find what they need for a future task at hand (Lew & De Schryver, 2014; Pintér, 2019; Nied Curcio, 2022; Rundell, 2018). On the other hand, digital dictionaries will become more popular in the future than ever, and education needs to respond to this: L2 education is to be adopted to accommodate the rising prominence of digital dictionaries, suggesting a paradigm shift in teaching dictionary use skills that balances traditional methods (i.e. paper-based dictionaries) with the demands of the digital age (i.e. digital dictionaries). With this in mind, the teaching of lexicographic skills will have to be updated and should focus on what students are to know in order to search in digital and print dictionaries effectively and successfully (P. Márkus, 2021).

Another novel finding of the current research is that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries increases with age. In addition to potential explanations related to students’ socioeconomic status, which was not examined in the scope of this research, the fact that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries increases with age can be explained by the fact that the use of dictionaries was more important in the past, as dictionaries were the only available resources, and that the use of printed dictionaries was more common among older age groups. It is therefore advisable for teachers to make students aware that buying a dictionary or subscribing to an online dictionary can be a worthwhile long-term investment for their general and professional L2 development. Quality dictionaries, whether traditional paper dictionaries or digital dictionaries, can help provide accurate and reliable linguistic and professional information and can contribute to more effective and appropriate L2 use (Muráth, 2020; Nied Curcio, 2022).

Since in Hungary reliable, free-to-access bilingual digital dictionaries have limited functionality (e.g. in terms of example sentences, presentation of meanings), it is also important to increase L2 learners’ willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries or to subscribe to such (Lew & De Schryver, 2014; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márkus et al., 2023; Rundell, 2018). Our results show that – albeit only to a small extent – willingness to use dictionaries and willingness to read usage guides determine willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries and their willingness to subscribe to such (Lew & Galas, 2008; Nied Curcio, 2022; P. Márkus & Pödör, 2021; Tóth et al., 2022). With a view to this, informing L2 teachers about the importance of (appropriate) dictionary use and about the relevance to practise dictionary use with L2 students would be necessary. In addition, it is important to encourage L2 students to use dictionaries on a regular basis, thus increasing learner autonomy and promoting the development of the ability to independently acquire knowledge and information.

**CONCLUSION**

With respect to our research question, the following can be concluded. Regarding RQ1.1 (To what extent are participants willing to use a dictionary?), the results show that the willingness of our participants to use dictionaries is relatively high. According to our data, the reason for this is that students who have completed several language courses and who are exam-oriented, and are thus goal-conscious, may be inclined to read the usage guides of dictionaries. As for RQ1.2 (To what extent are participants willing to buy a dictionary or to subscribe to a digital dictionary?), participants’ willingness to purchase dictionaries is low, which should be increased by raising awareness of the potential offered by dictionaries. Regarding RQ1.3 (How extensively do participants consult the usage guides of dictionaries?), it may be concluded that participants do not necessarily seem to read these sections of dictionaries but willingness to do so increases as students’ language learning career progresses. As for RQ1.4 (What influences participants’ willingness to buy a dictionary or to subscribe to a digital dictionary?), our results show that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries increases with age, which is important for L2 teachers to bear in mind. This is especially significant with a view to introducing L2 students to the advantages offered by quality dictionaries. From a methodological perspective, it is
relevant that the teaching of dictionary use to L2 students should be gradual and systematic. It is hoped that the above research and methodological recommendations can contribute to increasing Hungarian L2 learners’ willingness to use dictionaries in the areas discussed above, thereby boosting their autonomy in L2 learning and contributing to their desire to pursue lifelong learning of L2.

At the same time, the importance of the attitudes examined in the scope of this paper is underscored by Nesi’s (1999) work on dictionary skills, in which she outlines all the practical knowledge and skills needed to use dictionaries effectively. In her taxonomy, she divides dictionary skills into six categories: “before study”; “before dictionary consultation”; “locating entry information”; “interpreting entry information”; “recording entry information”; and “understanding lexicographical issues” (Nesi, 1999, pp. 53–54). In Nesi’s taxonomy, the first stage (“before study”) involves two prominent skills: 1. understanding of the typology of dictionaries and selecting one (or more) dictionary (dictionaries) for use or purchase; and 2. understanding of the types of information that can be found in dictionaries and other reference works. These skills are essential for the effective and successful use of a dictionary. Furthermore, it is assumed (Campoy-Cubillo, 2015; Gavrilidiou, 2013; Nesi, 1999) that, in possession of these skills, dictionary users will be aware of the range of available dictionaries, are then able to select the dictionaries that are appropriate for them and are willing to purchase the publications in question. Having read the instructions for correct use before purchase, dictionary users will know what type of information can be accessed in dictionaries. Based on the above considerations, it can be concluded that reading the usage guides and being willing to pay for print dictionaries or online dictionary use are major contributors to appropriate and effective dictionary use.

As for broader and further theoretical implications, based on the findings that participants’ willingness to use dictionaries is relatively high and that their willingness to purchase dictionaries is low, it appears that research is necessary to uncover the reasons behind this apparent conflict in conscious dictionary use. In light of the findings that willingness to usage guides increases as students’ language learning career progresses and that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries increases with age, the role of the teacher in developing and fostering students’ conscious dictionary use should also be scrutinised. For these examinations, further theoretical as well as quantitative and qualitative research is necessary.

PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Based on the above theoretical implications, this research allows for the drawing of several pedagogical implications. As the willingness of participants to use dictionaries is high, this high level of willingness should be maintained and supported through in-class dictionary activities focusing on active dictionary use including e.g. looking up the meanings of unknown words, etc. Such activities are also likely to boost students’ willingness to purchase dictionaries, which is found to be low. In the long run, these goals will contribute to developing and increasing students’ autonomous learning through using dictionaries, which may function as one component of lifelong learning.

It was also identified that willingness to pay for or subscribe to dictionaries increases with age. This may necessitate the development of a series of age- and level-specific activities related to dictionary use ranging from young beginner level to older advanced level activities. Such activities may gradually introduce students to the depth and complexity of information available in dictionaries including e.g. finding the right meaning of an unknown word at a beginner level to identifying different shades of meanings of synonyms at an advanced level. On the other hand, the introduction of low-priced subscriptions to online dictionaries, specifically designed for students or made available to students, may also contribute to increasing and develop students’ willingness to use dictionaries.

LIMITATIONS

With reference to the limitations of our research results reported above, it is important to bear in mind that our respondents were students from a single university in Hungary, so the data reported here should be interpreted with this in mind, and therefore the results of the study cannot be directly extrapolated to any other research context. In addition, even if the sample size is relatively large, it may not fully capture the diversity of the broader population of university students studying business in Hungary, leading to potential biases in the results. The research design and methodology may also introduce limitations. For a start, a quantitative research design comprising a self-report questionnaire survey served as the foundation for this investigation. However, conclusions drawn from the mix of quantitative and qualitative methods may be more reliable to capture nuanced behaviours or motivations that quantitative methods cannot fully reveal. These issues could be further investigated through the employment of the qualitative research paradigm (e.g. interviews). In light of this, new directions for future research may be explored, as further studies in the field are needed to refine and expand the results of this study: this can be imagined by broadening the scope of research to other universities and disciplines, and by including tests and interviews focusing on dictionary use, which would make the data more valid and accurate.

REFERENCES


