

A SURVEY OF DICTIONARY USE BY THAI  
UNIVERSITY STAFF AND STUDENTS, WITH SPECIAL  
REFERENCE TO POCKET ELECTRONIC DICTIONARIES

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## A SURVEY OF DICTIONARY USE BY THAI UNIVERSITY STAFF AND STUDENTS, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO POCKET ELECTRONIC DICTIONARIES

### ABSTRACT

This study aims at surveying both teachers' and students' general use of dictionaries, and knowledge of pocket electronic dictionaries (PEDs). It describes teachers' and students' use of types of dictionaries, dictionary ownership, preferences for dictionary use, and preferences for dictionary purchase. Participants in this study included 30 lecturers of English from the Department of Language at King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) in Thailand and 1,211 first-year non-English major students who also studied at KMUTT. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire. Findings of the study indicated that although the teachers preferred and encouraged their students to use monolingual learners' English dictionaries, the students preferred to use pocket electronic dictionaries. The findings also suggested that teachers were under informed about the contents and capabilities of Thai PEDs.

### KEYWORDS

Dictionary use; electronic pocket dictionaries; research into dictionary use

### RESUMO

Este artigo trata de uma pesquisa sobre o uso de dicionários por professores e alunos tailandeses, na qual foi verificado principalmente o que esses informantes sabem sobre dicionários eletrônicos portáteis (PEDs). Eles foram questionados a respeito da posse e utilização de diferentes tipos de dicionários e a respeito de suas preferências. Os sujeitos de pesquisa foram 30 professores de inglês do Departamento de Línguas da King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) na Tailândia, assim como 1.211 calouros - cujo curso não era Letras-Ingles - dessa mesma universidade. O instrumento de coleta de dados foi um questionário. Os resultados indicam que, embora os professores prefiram dicionários monolíngües para aprendizes e incentivem seus alunos a usá-los, os estudantes preferem PEDs. Percebeu-se também que os professores não conhecem bem o conteúdo e as facilidades dos PEDs tailandeses.

### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Uso de dicionários; dicionários eletrônicos portáteis; pesquisa sobre o uso de dicionários

Introduction  
Although English is a compulsory subject in Thailand at every level of education there are relatively few opportunities to use English dictionaries.

classroom, and by the time they enter university many students have only acquired a small stock of English words. At King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi (KMUTT) the official response to this problem has been to encourage undergraduates to buy the *Longman Active Study Dictionary* (LASD). This is used as the key text in dictionary skills training courses, and is the only dictionary students are allowed to use in the final examinations. When left to their own devices, however, many students seem to prefer to use pocket electronic dictionaries (PEDs) instead of LASD. PED use places the KMUTT English staff at something of a disadvantage, because they know little about PED contents and capabilities, and are unsure about the extent to which paper-based dictionary skills apply. Very little information that would be relevant to Thai lecturers is available in this respect, as the technology is changing rapidly; the PED manufacturers do not promote their products from a lexicographical perspective, and none of the existing PED descriptions (e.g. TAYLOR, CHAN, 1994; SHARPE, 1995; KOREN, 1997; SOBKOWIAK, 2002; DENG 2005) refer to the Thai context.

It is clearly unrealistic to entirely prevent students from using PEDs, especially if they perceive them to be more useful and efficient than intermediate learners' dictionaries such as LASD. A more sensible approach would be for staff to teach PED skills, and provide authoritative advice about the advantages and disadvantages of PED use. However, as Atkins and Varantola (1998: 115) point out: "Teachers will be better able to carry out such teaching if they are fully aware of exactly what their students are doing with their dictionaries, what they expect from them, and how easily they are satisfied during the process of consultation".

As a first step toward supporting teachers who want to help their students in this way, this study identifies some basic characteristics of PEDs on sale in Thailand, and explores the dictionary using habits and preferences of KMUTT staff and students.

### Pocket electronic dictionaries in Thailand

PEDs in Thailand normally contain the contents of at least three hard-copy dictionaries: English-Thai and Thai-English bilingual dictionaries and an English-English monolingual dictionary. PEDs range in price from 2900 to 15000 Baht (40 to 220 pounds sterling), as opposed to monolingual print dictionaries which cost between 420 and 900 Baht (6 to 13 pounds sterling), and bilingual print dictionaries which cost between 140 and 500 Baht (2 to 7 pounds sterling).

To give some idea of the range of features Thai PEDs offer we will briefly describe two models commonly used by Thai university students: *Super Smart* by *TalkingDict (Group Sense Ltd)* and *CyberDict 3 Advance* by *CyberDict Technology (Besta)*. *Super Smart* has recently gone out of production, and has been superseded by more advanced *TalkingDict Group Sense* models, but it was popular

with students at the time of our study (in the academic session 2006-7). Both PEDs retailed at roughly the same price.

*Super Smart* contains the contents of English-Thai and Thai-English bilingual dictionaries compiled by lecturers from the Chalermprakiat Center of Translation and Interpretation, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand (undated), and the *Concise American Heritage Dictionary* (1983, Houghton Mifflin). *CyberDict 3 Advance* contains the *Modern English-Thai Dictionary, Desk Reference Edition*, compiled by Thiangburanathum (1998), the *Oxford River English-Thai Dictionary* compiled by Mallikamas, Chakrabongse and Piammaattawat (2006) (with the English source taken from the Oxford-Duden German-English and English-German dictionary series), and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (6th Edition). In addition to these three main dictionaries, *CyberDict 3 Advance* also contains a monolingual Thai dictionary and specialist dictionaries for English idioms, homophones, abbreviations and technical terms (in Engineering, Computer Science, Law and Management Science).

Both PEDs provide some information about irregular verbs, phrasal verbs and idioms, and provide antonyms and synonyms for some headwords. The *Oxford River English-Thai Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* provide more information about common grammatical patterns and collocations, and more examples of word use as compared to the *Concise American Heritage Dictionary* and the bilingual dictionaries in *Super Smart*. The *Oxford River English-Thai Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* are also more up-to-date, listing more technical terms such as 'email' and 'internet'.

Both PEDs offer spoken pronunciation of headwords, and wildcard functions, but certain technical features are particular to *CyberDict 3 Advance*. If a headword is not listed in the dictionary the user selects from the PED menu, a cross search function will enable an automatic search across the remaining dictionaries in the PED. For example, the headwords 'hang up', 'stand for' and 'yuck' are not listed in the *Modern English-Thai Dictionary*, so *CyberDict 3 Advance* will locate entries for these words in the *Oxford River English-Thai Dictionary* and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. *CyberDict 3 Advance* also helps users with commonly misspelled words by providing a list of possible alternatives. For example, if users type the headword 'rinkle' a pop up box will offer the following three options: *spelling check* (which offers a choice between 'runkle', 'wrinkle', 'rinse', and 'wrinkly'), *nearest word* (which shows the word that is nearest in form, i.e. rink), and *add new word* (which allows users to create an entry for 'rinkle' and provide their own definition).

PEDs in Thailand typically include other non-lexicographical features. *CyberDict 3 Advance*, for example, includes learning materials (TOEFL Exam Exercises, useful words, 'travel dialogues' and the like), a personal information / diary component, and calendar, clock and calculator functions.

## Staff use of dictionaries

We developed a three-part questionnaire to record personal information about staff in KMUTT's English Language Department, their general use of dictionaries, and their knowledge of pocket electronic dictionaries. The questionnaire was completed in February 2007 by 30 English language lecturers in the Department of Language Studies, KMUTT (out of a total of 37 staff in the department).

All the respondents were experienced teachers: twenty had more than 10 years' experience, and of these, seven had more than 20 years' experience. All 30 owned at least one dictionary, in 29 cases including a monolingual print dictionary, and in 22 cases including a monolingual dictionary on CD-Rom. Bilingual dictionaries were less popular, as can be seen from Table 1.

Monolingual dictionaries in book form	29
Monolingual dictionaries on CD-ROM	22
Bilingual dictionaries online	11
Bilingual dictionaries in book form	10
Monolingual dictionaries online	9
Pocket electronic dictionaries	4

Table 1: Staff ownership of dictionaries

Table 2 gives details of the monolingual dictionary publishers. Dictionary titles are not given, as respondents did not always supply these (although 18 stated that they owned a print copy of LASD).

Monolingual dictionaries in book form		Monolingual dictionaries on CD-ROM	
Longman	25	Longman	8
Cobuild	24	Cobuild	8
Oxford	21	Macmillan	3
Macmillan	13	Oxford	2
Cambridge	9	Cambridge	1
American Heritage	1		
Webster's	1		
Total	94	Total	22

Table 2: Staff ownership of monolingual dictionaries

Only nine out of the 30 staff respondents thought that 'some' or 'all' PEDs contained the contents of at least three hard-copy dictionaries; 20 said that they had no idea how many dictionaries a PED might contain, and 18 said that they had no idea whether English-English dictionaries were licensed for use in PEDs. Surprisingly, even the three lecturers who owned PEDs had little idea about their lexicographical content. One thought that PEDs contained only one dictionary, and the other two thought that they contained only two.

Almost all the staff (28 out of 30) stated that they preferred to use monolingual dictionaries, and many expressed the belief that a monolingual dictionary provided more accurate and reliable information about grammar and usage. Some of the statements were: "It provides a lot of meaning and there are explanation about grammar." - "I can see examples, synonym, antonym, and so on." - "I can check the use of words in contexts." - "I can check usage."

Table 3 shows staff dictionary preferences according to activity (some respondents chose more than one dictionary type).

Type of dictionary	Number who used this type when reading	Number who used this type when writing
Monolingual dictionary in book form	20	23
Monolingual dictionary on CD-Rom	8	7
Bilingual dictionary in book form	2	1
Pocket electronic dictionary	2	-
Online monolingual dictionary	3	-

Table 3: Dictionary types used by staff for reading and writing

The seven most experienced members of staff (who had taught for 20 to 30 years) did not use electronic dictionaries at all, and there was a general feeling that print dictionaries were preferable, regardless of activity type. Dislike of computers, lack of familiarity with computers and lack of computer access were common reasons for preferring print dictionaries: "I am not familiar with CD ROMs or any electronic equipment and I mostly finish up my work at home with no computer." - "I don't like computers." - "I do not have computer literacy and I am not good at typing."

The slightly greater reported use of CD-Rom and online dictionaries whilst reading suggests that staff were more likely to read in English than to write in English while working at the computer. Respondents explained, however, that

they often consulted dictionaries while reading and writing without computer access: "When I read, I don't normally turn the computer on. So I tend to use a dictionary in book form more often." - "I often use books rather than computer ones because I often read in bed or at my desk, without a computer." - "I tend to write in a paper before typing it into a program in the computer, so dictionary in book form is more convenient for me." - "I mostly write on a piece of paper (except when writing an email), so I think using a dictionary in book form is more convenient." - "I can open the dictionary in book form anytime without having to always keep the computer on." - "Convenient to use without a computer."

A couple of respondents acknowledged the value of CD-Rom audio files: "The pronunciation is better." - "I'd like to see words in paper mostly. I prefer book form but sometimes I use CD-ROM because I want to hear the pronunciation."

Those few respondents who preferred to consult monolingual dictionaries on CD-Rom commented on their convenience: "Words can be found easily." - "Easy to use, easy to find meaning." - "Quick and easy to look up words and take away." - "Very convenient, easy to access, provide complete data." - "All dictionary information on CD Rom is already installed in the computer, so it is very easy and convenient when I work and read anything from the computer."

Information on CD-Rom is also easily transferred to a wordprocessor, and some staff appreciated the CD-Rom dictionary as a tool for lesson preparation, because information could be copied and pasted into teaching and learning materials: "Very easy to use, e.g. I can copy examples from the dictionary to create exercise for students." - "Fast. Teacher can copy and paste information in a wordprocessing program when she prepares her lessons."

PEDs are not so flexible in this respect, but it might be argued that they offer some of the best features of both CD-Rom and book dictionaries, and would thus be a particularly appropriate tool for the contexts and purposes reported in the questionnaire responses. Like CD-Rom dictionaries, PEDs are quicker and more convenient to consult than print dictionaries. PEDs also provide audio pronunciation like CD-Roms, but do not require knowledge of computers or access to a computer, and can be used at the table or desk, or while reading in bed, like print dictionaries.

Despite this, most staff rejected the idea of PEDs, and expressed little faith in the quality of their contents. As one staff member commented: "I need to use lots of grammatical information, examples and explanations of various meanings of a word as provided in the monolingual book form of dictionary."

The only lecturer who preferred using a PED to any other dictionary format used it in combination with other sources: "I will use it only when I cannot think of English vocabulary. However, I will have to check how that word is used from a monolingual either in book form or on CD-Rom."

Predictably, lecturers were overwhelmingly in favour of their students using

monolingual dictionaries. Only one of the 30 did not encourage this, and only one claimed to encourage students to use their PEDs. They were highly critical of the PED as a tool for students, and many referred to the inadequacy of the dictionary information it provides: "It doesn't give the correct meaning and doesn't tell students clearly how to use the word in different contexts." - "It always gives the wrong usage." - "It's not necessary and it costs quite a lot." - Expensive, no examples." - "Because I don't think a PED provides enough information that helps students." - "Limited vocabulary and doesn't provide sentence examples, too expensive." - "I think it will create a bad habit of using good/better dictionaries like monolingual ones." - "Some PED versions are not very good. Some versions provide a limited number of vocabulary." - "It is not as detailed as a dictionary in book form." - "A PED does not provide usage, examples. And as a consequence, students are likely to make mistakes." - "There is not enough useful information." - "Not accurate and expensive." - "Information rather limited, no examples."

However more than half the staff recognized that PEDs contain information about word class (17 respondents), and countable and uncountable nouns (16 respondents), and some of the staff criticisms seem to suggest bad practice or lack of skill on the part of students, rather than inadequacies on the part of PEDs: "When using a pocket electronic dictionary, they just type a Thai word and pick up one English word from the list provided. They don't know how to compose a sentence by using the word." - "Students will look up words and use words without looking at the context." - "They tend to select the wrong word because of their lack of knowledge in part of speech." - "Do not help improve reading as they normally use a bilingual dictionary." - "It is too convenient, so it is not challenging."

Our conclusion was that the lecturers blamed PEDs for consultation problems that could just as easily arise with print dictionaries, and were generally unaware of the resources available in some of the most popular PEDs such as *CyberDict 3 Advance*, which contains the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (6th Edition).

### The students' use of dictionaries

We also developed a questionnaire entitled 'The Dictionary Use of Thai University Students', which was completed by 1211 KMUTT undergraduates in the academic session 2006-7. Of these, 580 were taking 'Fundamental English III' in the first semester of the academic year, and 631 were taking 'Fundamental English IV' in the second semester of the academic year. The respondents were selected to represent every department in all three faculties at KMUTT: the Faculty of Engineering (450 respondents), the Faculty of Industrial Engineering (437 respondents), and the Faculty of Science (324 respondents). None of the respondents were majoring in English. There were more male respondents (694) than females (517), reflecting the gender balance amongst the student population in the University as a whole.

The questionnaires were completed in class, in the presence of a research assistant.

Out of the 1211 respondents, 1149 stated that they owned at least one dictionary (95%). Of these, 938 (82%) owned a monolingual dictionary in book form (61% wrote 'Longman', probably referring to LASD), 521 (45%) owned a bilingual dictionary in book form, and 456 (40%) owned PEDs. Although LASD CD-Roms are 'bundled' with the printed copies of LASD on sale at KMUTT, only 334 respondents claimed ownership of a monolingual dictionary on CD-Rom, suggesting that many respondents had not even bothered to explore the inside of their LASD copies. Most KMUTT students do not possess their own computer and therefore would not have much use for a CD-ROM. A number of respondents also claimed ownership of online monolingual dictionaries (274, 24%), and/or online bilingual dictionaries (164, 14%). Most KMUTT students only have limited internet access, and thus would have few opportunities to use online dictionary resources.

Despite the fact that the majority of respondents owned a monolingual dictionary, most (883, 73%) said that they preferred to use bilingual dictionaries, and only 266 (23%) stated that they preferred to use monolingual dictionaries. They claimed to use their dictionaries much more often for reading than for writing (1022 as compared to 127), a response which probably reflects the fact that all the respondents studied in the medium of Thai, and read textbooks written in English but did not write assignments in English, except for their English language courses. Their claim to use dictionaries to translate English into Thai (1017 respondents), rather than to translate Thai into English (132 respondents) corresponds with their stated reading and writing habits.

Table 4 shows the types of dictionaries respondents generally used when reading and writing.

Type of dictionary	Number who used this type when reading	Number who used this type when writing
Bilingual dictionary in book form	525	502
Pocket electronic dictionary	435	412
Monolingual dictionary in book form	46	102
Monolingual dictionary on CD-Rom	10	24
Online bilingual dictionary	3	7

Online monolingual dictionary	1	3
Total	1020	1050

Table 4: Dictionary types used by students for reading and writing

Bilingual book dictionaries and PEDs were clearly preferred for both writing and reading tasks. The number of subjects who stated that they owned bilingual print dictionaries and/or PEDs (521 and 456) roughly corresponds to the number of subjects who stated that they normally used these dictionaries for reading and/or writing tasks. On the other hand there was a great mismatch between the number of respondents who stated that they owned a monolingual print dictionary (1149) and the number who stated that they normally used one (46 for reading, and 102 for writing). Slightly greater monolingual dictionary use was reported for writing tasks than for reading tasks, perhaps because monolingual learners' dictionaries such as LASD contain more productive grammar and usage features.

The PED brands respondents reported owning are listed in Table 5.

Brand name	No. of owners
Talking-Dict by Group Sense Ltd	192
CyberDict (Besta) by CyberDict Technology Ltd	170
Cal-Comp Electronics (Thailand) Ltd	17
VTech by VTech Electronics Ltd	7
Other brands	15
Not stated	55
Total	456

Table 5: Pocket electronic dictionary ownership

By the time of the questionnaire survey *VTech Electronics* had merged with *CyberDict Technology*, and *Cal-Comp Electronics* had ceased trading, so only the two most popular companies of the four listed were continuing to produce PEDs. Many of the respondents owned *Super Smart* by *Talking Dict* (a model that is no longer commercially available), or *CyberDict 3 Advance*.

Table 6 lists the responses of the 1097 respondents who answered the question: 'If you do not have a dictionary or if you plan to buy a new dictionary, what type of dictionary would you like to buy?'

Pocket electronic dictionary	818
Bilingual dictionary in book form	177
Monolingual dictionary in book form	88
Monolingual dictionary on CD-Rom	11
Online bilingual dictionary	3
Online monolingual dictionary	1

Table 6: Preferences for dictionary purchase

The *Longman Active Study Dictionary* (LASD) was a recommended purchase for KMUTT students, and it might be expected that students who already owned LASD would want to progress to a more advanced monolingual learners' dictionary, such as the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDOCE). The responses indicate, however, that the students' own preference was for PEDs.

The most influential factor when selecting a new dictionary was claimed to be the price (716 respondents). As PEDs are considerably more expensive than print dictionaries it appears that buyers would prefer to buy PEDs regardless of price, although they might be influenced by the price of one PED as opposed to another. Other factors identified as affecting their choice of dictionary included size/weight (187 respondents) and screen layout (35 respondents). Only three respondents chose coverage (the number of headwords) as a factor influencing dictionary purchase. There was little indication that students were interested in monolingual PED components.

## Conclusion

Our survey suggests that English lecturers in Thailand are under-informed about the contents and capabilities of popular Thai PEDs. The two main PED companies in Thailand license lexicographical content from respected dictionary publishers, but in most cases the English lecturers reject PED use out of hand, and do not encourage students to make the best use of a tool that could be more valuable to them than the print-based bilingual dictionaries that they will otherwise turn to. Staff may also be missing out on a handy resource for their own personal use. Although PEDs do not offer all the advantages of electronic dictionaries on CD-Rom (the screen size is small, there is no quick cut-and-paste facility, and there are no illustrations) they have the advantage of not requiring computer access, and are therefore ideal for consultation when away from the workstation (in class, or when reading in bed).

It is to be hoped that our findings will encourage English teachers to explore PEDs more thoroughly, and with an open mind, and will lead perhaps to the development of dictionary skills training materials for PED users.

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## DICTIONARY USE IN GREEK EDUCATION: AN ATTEMPT TO TRACK THE FIELD THROUGH THREE EMPIRICAL SURVEYS

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