An evaluation of the Hand-held Electronic Dictionaries Used by Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract. This paper compares four hand-held electronic dictionaries with two paper-printed versions. The results show that the four different pocket electronic dictionaries contain less information than their paper-printed counterparts. Based on the results of the study, some pedagogical implications are drawn.

Keywords: L2 vocabulary learning, hand-held electronic dictionaries, paper printed dictionaries

1 Background of the Study – What the Reviews Say

1.1 Students' Ownership of Electronic Dictionaries

Due to rapid development in technology, the electronic dictionary is no longer a novelty for FL learners around the world. The tremendous improvement in technology has being overwhelming dictionary users with a variety of electronic dictionaries. With a 'scanning dictionary', users may simply scan the word with the dictionary which looks like a pen and get the translation on the screen in no time. Learners may even get the translation of a word by just speaking to a 'phonetic-access dictionary'. (Koren, 1997)

In China, the pocket/hand-held electronic dictionary is very popular among FL learners. In Nesi's (2002) survey on dictionary use by international students in a British university, he observed students from Asia and the Middle East using pocket electronic dictionaries frequently. This was confirmed by a Chinese researcher, Deng. In his (2005) survey, 70% of the subjects use pocket electronic dictionaries. The results of the two surveys show that Chinese students at home and abroad have a positive attitude to pocket electronic dictionaries and rely very much on them in their learning.

1.2 Teachers' and Researchers' Views on Pocket Electronic Dictionaries

In contrast to students' attachment to electronic dictionaries, teachers and researchers criticize these kinds of dictionaries. Taylor and Chan (1994) find teachers are very doubtful about the value of pocket electronic dictionaries. Koren (1997) mentions two reasons why certain researchers (Zahner, Gupta and Olohan, 1994; Steiner, 1994) criticize electronic dictionaries. One is that electronic dictionaries provide less information at one time on the screen because of the limitation of the screen size; paper printed dictionaries can provide more information on one page. The other is that electronic dictionaries always give the users much less information regarding the entry they consult than printed dictionaries.

As Kay points out, 'technology often forces us to choose between quality and convenience' (1991, in Koren, 1997). Our questions are: Do the pocket electronic dictionaries that Chinese students use possess both of the two features? Are they reliable for learning English? The following study was motivated by the desire to find an answer to these questions.

2 The Study- What is Really Included in Pocket Electronic Dictionaries?

Four electronic dictionaries used by students at Three Gorges University were investigated. The four dictionaries produced by four different companies who claim that the dictionaries they produce include authoritative dictionaries like Oxford and Longman. We shall endeavour to ascertain whether the four contain the same amount of information as the original paper printed dictionaries they include. Additional information about them can be found in Table 1.

Three words i.e., *hollow* (adj.), *boot* (n.), and *punish* (v.) were selected at random to check the amount of information contained in each dictionary. The results are as follows.

Table 1. Information about the Dictionaries Investigated

	The year it was bought	Price (RMB)	Pronunciation	Dictionary it contains
Dictionary 1	2004	668	Pronunciation	*The concise Oxford English Dictionary* (*COD*)
Dictionary 2	2001	950	Pronunciation	*Oxford Dictionary* (No edition)
Dictionary 3	2004	380	No pronunciation	*Longman English Dictionary*[1]
Dictionary 4	2006	400	Pronunciation	*Longman English Dictionary*

Hollow. It is very clear from Table 2 that paper printed dictionaries contain more information than their electronic counterparts. First, the English explanations or Chinese translations in pocket electronic dictionaries are not more complete than those in paper printed dictionaries. Second, the paper printed dictionaries provide inflections and usage of *hollow* while dictionaries 1 and 2 provide none and dictionaries 3 and 4 give only one inflection of *hollow*. There is also another difference that is not revealed in Table 2. COD and the Longman dictionary both give explicit instructions on the register of the word *hollow*. Dictionaries 3 and 4 contain more examples than the Longman dictionary. However, the Longman dictionary analyzed in the paper was published nearly 20 years ago, in 1988, while the electronic dictionaries were invented in the last few years. Therefore, we cannot simply assume that dictionaries 3 and 4 are better than the Longman one.

As for the language of definition, all the electronic dictionaries give simpler English explanations than the paper printed dictionaries.

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[1] The *Longman* dictionary analyzed in the paper was the *Longman English-Chinese Dictionary of Contemporary English* published in 1988.

Table 2. Information about *Hollow* Contained in the Dictionaries Examined

	Dictionary 1	Dictionary 2	*COD*	Dictionary 3, 4	*Longman* Dictionary
Chinese translation	5	5	5	4	5
English explanations	5	5	5	4	5
Inflections	0	0	2	1	2
Usage of the word	0	0	1	0	1
Collocations	0	0	6	0	0
Examples	3	8	8	4	1

Boot. For *boot* the paper printed dictionaries obviously contain more information than the four electronic ones. The *Longman* dictionary gives a picture of different parts of a car to illustrate the meaning of *boot*. However, none of the electronic dictionaries would have illustrations. This can be considered another major disadvantage of pocket electronic dictionaries.

Boot also means a kind of shoe. The paper printed dictionaries give explanations but no pictures or examples of different kinds of boots. But the *Oxford* and *Longman* dictionaries published later do give pictures to illustrate *Wellington boots*, *hiking boots*, *etc.*. As for electronic dictionaries, none of them give illustrations. Only dictionaries 3 and 4 give two examples, i.e., *army boots*, and *Wellington boots*. However, there is no explanation or illustration as to what *Wellington boots* are.

Moreover, paper printed dictionaries give more collocations or idioms and detailed information regarding the register of the idioms. Pocket electronic dictionaries give information about the register of the collocations or idioms they contain as well, although they provide fewer idioms.

Table 3. Information about *Boot* Contained in the Dictionaries Examined

	Dictionary 1	Dictionary 2	COD	Dictionary 3, 4	*Longman* Dictionary
Chinese translation	3	3	7	2	5
English explanations	3	3	7	2	5
Inflections	0	0	1	0	0
Collocations/idioms	0	0	3	6	7
Examples	1	4	2	4	4

Punish. Likewise, explanations given by the electronic dictionaries are fewer than those of paper printed dictionaries. *COD* provides four inflections of *punish*, and none of the four electronic dictionaries give the same information. In *COD*, the third meaning of *punish* is labeled *colloquial*. However, none of the four electronic dictionaries we examined give any information about the register of *punish*.

In addition, the two paper printed dictionaries provide the usage and part of speech of *punish*. In sharp contrast, the four electronic dictionaries contain no similar information.

Table 4. Information about *Punish* Contained in the Dictionaries Examined

	Dictionary 1	Dictionary 2	*COD*	Dictionary 3, 4	*Longman* Dictionary
Chinese translation	3	2	4	1	2
English explanations	3	2	4	1	2
Inflections	0	0	4	0	0
Usage of the word	0	0	1	0	1
Examples	0	2	0	2	3

3 Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

From the study, we find that the pocket electronic dictionaries used by the students do not have sufficient and updated information as they expected. Nevertheless, our purpose is not to condemn the modern invention, but to urge improvement in technology as well as lexicography.

We suggest that teachers should give students explicit instructions on selecting and using different kinds of dictionaries. He (1989, in Koren, 1997) provides his solutions to this probliem. Sockemi shows his students at the beginning of a year all the information in the students' dictionaries. By investigating the texts on their own, students come to realize which kinds of dictionary are more useful. Students' lack of knowledge about using a dictionary is no longer questioned. To use a dictionary effectively first they have to possess sufficient knowledge to distinguish useful dictionaries from bad ones, or know clearly about different functions of different dictionaries. Hence, teachers' instructions on how to select and use dictionaries are very necessary.

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