How do Polish Learners of English Rate Bilingual and Monolingual Dictionaries?

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Abstract
The topic of this paper is the evaluation by Polish learners of English of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries used by those learners. Data for the paper come from 712 Polish learners of English representing a broad range of EFL proficiency levels. Subjects were asked to rate two dictionaries: their dictionary of first choice and their dictionary of second choice. The effect of choice as a predictor variable is also explored. A tendency is revealed for the mid-level competence learners to give the lowest ratings to their dictionaries. Monolingual dictionaries were given significantly higher ratings than bilingual dictionaries. Subjects rated dictionaries of first choice more highly than their second-choice dictionaries.

1. Introduction

This paper presents and analyzes assessment ratings by Polish learners of English of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries used by those learners. Data for the paper come from a larger project investigating dictionary use by Polish learners of English, and were collected between December 1999 and May 2000.

1.1 The problem

Results of the few previous studies that have looked into the issue of how users rate their dictionaries (Baxter 1980; Béjoint 1981; Kharma 1985; Tomaszczyk 1979) suggest that dictionary users tend to give higher ratings to monolingual dictionaries than to bilingual dictionaries, even though, somewhat paradoxically, it is bilingual dictionaries that they seem to prefer to use.

Data on the relationship between dictionary evaluation and dictionary users' language proficiency level is, to my knowledge, nonexistent. Further, since the issues of dictionary choice and dictionary evaluation are related, I have included choice (first versus second choice) as a predictor.

1.2 The hypotheses

The following three hypotheses were taken as a starting point for the study:
1. In terms of the influence of proficiency level on dictionary ratings, an inverse relationship is expected.
2. Monolingual dictionaries are expected to receive higher overall ratings than bilingual dictionaries.

3. Dictionaries named as users' first choice will be rated more highly than second-choice dictionaries.

Hypothesis 1 is based on the rationale that the more proficient learners will tend to be more critical and will more readily find fault with dictionaries, and also their expectations may be higher.

Hypothesis 2 is based on the previous findings and also on the expectation that entries of monolingual dictionaries, being exclusively in the foreign language, are not as easily faulted by users as are bilingual entries (see discussion towards the end of this paper).

Hypothesis 3 is based on the expectation that dictionary users will rationally tend to select the tool they think is best for the job.

1.3 Subjects and method

A sample of 712 Polish learners of English representing a broad spectrum of levels acted as subjects for the study. The sample represents 44 different learner groups from 20 educational institutions around Poland. The main project combines several methods of data collection, but data for this study mostly come from the Learner Survey and Teacher Survey, both collected by written questionnaire in class.

Subjects were asked to rate, on a five-point scale, up to two dictionaries which they used most frequently. They were instructed to tick one of the five boxes with graded verbal descriptions in Polish as follows (English glosses and corresponding numerical codes are given in parentheses): *świetny* ('excellent', 5), *dobry* ('good', 4), *ujdzie* ('OK', 3), *kiepski* ('poor', 2), *dno* ('awful', 1).

2. Results

A total of 1008 ratings were obtained, with a breakdown as shown in Table 1 and in the histogram in Figure 1.

Rating	Count	Cumulative	Percent	Cumulative %
1	8	8	0.8	0.8
2	23	31	2.3	3.1
3	187	218	18.6	21.6
4	590	808	58.5	80.2
5	200	1008	19.8	100.0

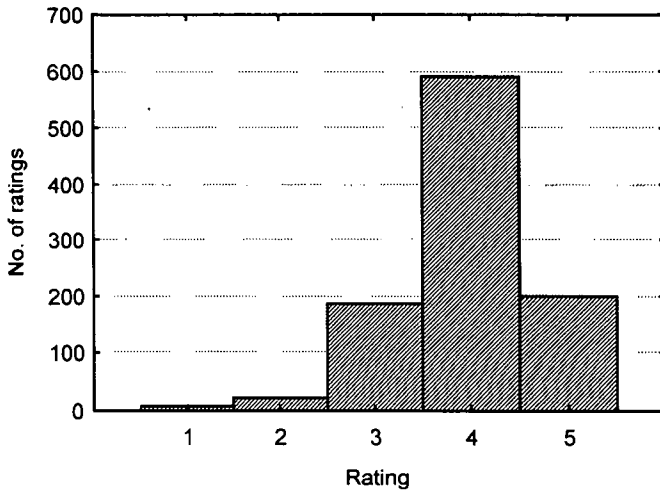Table 1: Breakdown of subjects' ratings of dictionaries

Figure 1: Histogram of subjects' ratings of dictionaries

Table 1 and Figure 1 indicate that the ratings exhibit a well-defined modal value of 4 ('good') and a left-skewed distribution. Since subjects were rating the dictionaries they themselves preferred to consult, it should not be surprising that the ratings tend to be mostly positive, with 78% of the responses representing better-than-neutral evaluations, and only 4% worse than neutral. Negative ratings could reflect a variety of underlying situations that might lead to dissatisfaction with the dictionaries most frequently used: the user might prefer another (better) dictionary, but the dictionary choice is beyond the user's control (school policy, school copies, a gift); the user might not be able to afford a better dictionary. A better dictionary might be impractical to use, such as when most dictionary use takes place at school and a better dictionary is too heavy to carry, or is installed on the user's home desktop computer; a better dictionary might not be available on the market, or the user has not been able to obtain it; the user may be unfavourably disposed to dictionaries in general, but is nevertheless forced to use them. Overall, however, such hypothetical cases are probably a minority, since the general picture that emerges from subjects' ratings is one of a fairly high level of satisfaction with dictionaries.

2.1 Ratings by level

Let us now examine how learners of different levels rate their dictionaries (Hypothesis 1). Table 2 gives mean ratings for subjects within the five level groups. Figure 2 plots mean ratings as a function of level.

Level	Mean rating	N
1	3.94	210
2	3.89	201
3	3.86	221
4	4.00	196
5	4.04	180

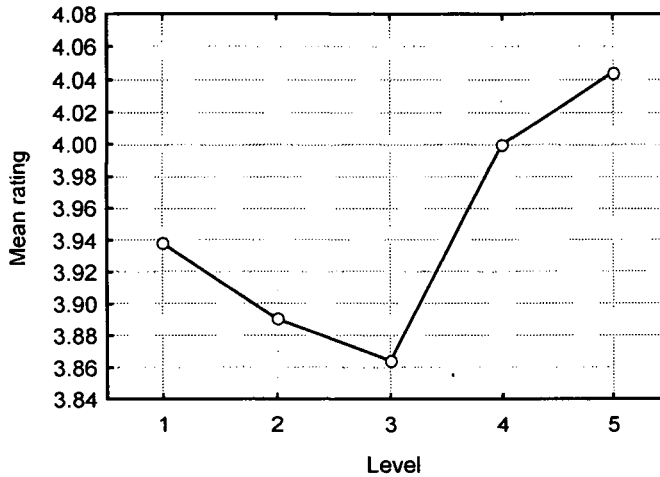Table 2: Mean dictionary rating by learner level

Figure 2: Mean dictionary rating by learner level

Table 2 indicates that the contributions of the five learner levels to ratings data are fairly equal, with about 200 ratings from subjects of each level, ranging from 180 to 221, or by about ±10%.

The tendency that emerges from Figure 2 appears to be for the dictionary evaluations to decline from the lowest learner level to level 3, and then climb for levels 4 and 5. This effect, however, is not significant ($F(4, 1003)=2$; $p=0.09$). Therefore, Hypothesis 1 is not confirmed by the results. There is, however, a tendency compatible with the Hypothesis for the first three level, which appears to be reversed from level 3 up. One might at this point hypothesize that perhaps the upward tendency for levels 4 and 5 reflects an increased involvement of monolingual dictionaries, which tend to be rated more highly than bilingual dictionaries.

2.2 Monolingual vs. bilingual dictionaries

Table 3 gives the mean ratings, standard errors, and 95% confidence intervals for bilingual and monolingual dictionaries.

Type	Mean Rating	Std. Error	-95%	+95%	N
bilingual	3.90	0.02	3.86	3.95	848
monolingual	4.40	0.08	4.25	4.56	84

Table 3: Subjects' ratings of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries

The number of ratings, 932, is here somewhat smaller than the total 1008, since those ratings for which the monolingual-bilingual status could not be determined had to be rejected. The results show that the typical rating for a monolingual dictionary (4.40) is higher than that for a bilingual dictionary (3.90) by exactly half a grade. This effect is found to be highly significant by a one-way ANOVA (F(1, 930)=36.8, p<0.0001), and gives support to Hypothesis 2. The finding is consistent with that of Tomaszczyk (1979), who also found that Polish dictionary users value monolingual dictionaries more highly than they do bilingual dictionaries. Similar findings have been reported by other researchers (Baxter 1980; Béjoint 1981; Kharma 1985).

The effect is open to several interpretations. It could be that learners express greater satisfaction with monolingual dictionaries because they are (in principle) more effective than bilingual dictionaries. However, other data obtained in the study suggest that subjects are unwilling to use monolingual dictionaries, and even if they do, they tend to use them as second choice. It could be that the monolingual dictionaries available on the Polish market represent, on average, a better professional level of lexicography than do the available bilingual dictionaries. There is a lot of anecdotal evidence to support this as at least a partial explanation. One should consider the impressive resources available to the major publishers of monolingual dictionaries, and the fact that until fairly recently most bilingual dictionaries available in Poland had been several decades out of date. In terms of the coverage of current terms and senses, such old dictionaries must be at a disadvantage. Even with these considerations, other findings of the study put this interpretation into question: if subjects think that monolingual dictionaries are so much better, why is it that so many of them were unwilling to use them, and even if they did, they tended to use them as second choice?

Another interpretation is that Polish learners see monolingual dictionaries as better because the level of their language and reference skills may make it easier for them to register the failures of bilingual dictionaries than of monolingual dictionaries. Because semantic explanation in monolingual dictionaries takes the form of a (sometimes complex) syntactic construction in the foreign language, or rather a special metalanguage based on the foreign language, users may lay the blame on their lack of foreign language skills in the face of problems with interpreting a dictionary entry and fitting it to the textual context, rather than blame the dictionary. In contrast, they may feel more in a position to find fault with bilingual dictionaries, where much of the content is provided in their native language.

Yet another aspect of dictionary evaluation by users is the question of the influence of the opinions of various authorities on learners' evaluations: to what extent are learners' opinions a reflection of their own experience with dictionaries, and to what extent are they a simple restatement of the opinions of others they are exposed to? Anecdotally, language teachers often speak of monolingual dictionaries making it possible for learners to "think in the foreign language". The transition from bilingual to monolingual dictionaries is seen as a

sign of progress (which to some extent it is, of course, as also confirmed by some other results of the larger study), and thus renders an aura of superiority to monolingual dictionaries, which may well filter into subjects' ratings.

2.3 Ratings by choice

It was expected that subjects would tend to give higher ratings to the dictionary they named as the most frequently used (first choice) than to the one they named as the second most frequently used (second choice). Mean ratings broken down by choice, together with standard error values and 95% confidence intervals are given in Table 4.

Choice	Mean Rating	Std. Error	-95%	+95%	N
1st	3.98	0.03	3.93	4.04	645
2nd	3.87	0.04	3.79	3.95	363

Table 4: Subjects' ratings of first-choice and second-choice dictionaries

The mean rating for the dictionary of first choice is 3.98, for second choice it is 3.87. Although the effect size is small, only a tenth of a grade, it is statistically significant (one-way ANOVA, $F(1, 1006)=5.6$, $p=0.02$), and Hypothesis 3 is thus supported.

When only those responses are included that can be unambiguously assigned to either the bilingual or monolingual type, the corresponding data would look as in Table 5.

Choice	Mean Rating	Std. Error	-95%	+95%	N
1st	4.25	0.06	4.14	4.36	608
2nd	4.03	0.06	3.91	4.15	324

Table 5: Subjects' ratings of first-choice and second-choice dictionaries, restricted to identifiable bilingual or monolingual only

Mean ratings are here somewhat higher than in Table 4, the effect is more significant ($F(1, 928)=7.3$, $p=0.007$), and the effect size is twice as large. A possible explanation for the increase in mean ratings is that the dictionaries that the subjects cannot even identify as bilingual or monolingual tend not to be the dictionaries that learners care much about, hence perhaps the lower evaluations.

In addition to the above simple effects, interaction effects will be examined in what follows to further clarify the picture.

2.4 Ratings by type and choice

Mean subjects' ratings broken down by type and choice are given in Table 6.

Dictionary Type	Choice	Mean Rating	N
bilingual	1st	3.95	565
bilingual	2nd	3.82	283
monolingual	1st	4.56	43
monolingual	2nd	4.24	41

Table 6: Subjects' ratings by dictionary type and choice

The type by choice interaction is not significant ($F(1, 928)=1.2$, $p=0.27$), which suggests no clear preference for either dictionary type to be systematically selected as first or second choice.

2.5 Ratings by choice and level

Table 7 gives mean ratings for all combinations of choice and level.

Choice	Level	Mean Rating	N
1st	1	4.01	130
1st	2	3.89	121
1st	3	3.93	161
1st	4	3.97	132
1st	5	4.18	101
2nd	1	3.82	80
2nd	2	3.89	80
2nd	3	3.70	60
2nd	4	4.06	64
2nd	5	3.87	79

Table 7: : Subjects' ratings by choice and learner level

A General Regression Model (GRM) ANOVA with rating as dependent variable and level and choice as categorial predictors produces a significant whole model ($p=0.005$), significant main effects of choice ($F(1, 998)=6.65$, $p=0.01$) and level ($F(4, 998)=2.64$, $p=0.03$) but a non-significant choice by level interaction ($F(4, 998)=2.23$, $p=0.06$). The main effects have already been discussed above. The choice by level interaction, although not significant at the 5% level, approaches significance and is quite interesting (see Figure 3).
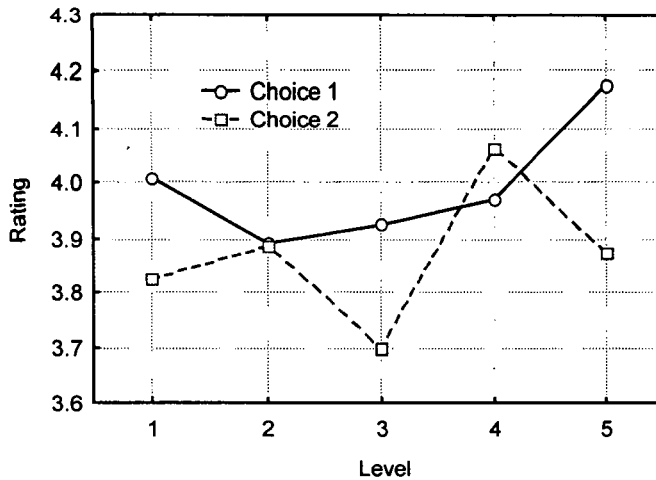
Figure 3: Subjects' ratings by choice and learner level

There appears to be a tendency for first-choice dictionary ratings to decline for lower-range proficiency level learners and then to go up for higher-level learners. For second-choice dictionaries, it is difficult to observe any regular tendencies. The mean ratings for first-choice dictionaries are higher than those for second-choice dictionaries at levels 1, 3 and 5. The ratings for the two choices are identical at level 2, and at level 4 the mean rating for second-choice dictionaries is actually higher than for first-choice dictionaries, which is somewhat surprising. At first sight, one could try to explain this effect by the influence of monolingual dictionaries, which receive consistently higher ratings and are at the same time more likely to be named as second choice. However, a careful examination of the data reveals that this explanation is unlikely in view of the very low rates with which level 4 subjects named monolingual dictionaries. Simply, there are two few ratings given for monolingual dictionaries at level 4 to make a difference here. In order to examine the relationships more closely, a three-way interaction must be analyzed, taking into account choice, level, and dictionary type at the same time.

2.6 Ratings by dictionary type, choice and level
Ratings broken down by choice, level and dictionary type are listed in Table 8.

Dictionary Type	Choice	Level	Mean Rating	N
bilingual	1st	1	4.02	121
bilingual	1st	2	3.90	113
bilingual	1st	3	3.94	152
bilingual	1st	4	3.94	120
bilingual	1st	5	3.92	59
bilingual	2nd	1	3.84	69
bilingual	2nd	2	3.87	67
bilingual	2nd	3	3.69	52
bilingual	2nd	4	4.04	51
bilingual	2nd	5	3.59	44
monolingual	1st	4	4.50	4
monolingual	1st	5	4.56	39
monolingual	2nd	1	3.67	3
monolingual	2nd	3	4.50	2
monolingual	2nd	4	4.50	4
monolingual	2nd	5	4.25	32

Table 8: Breakdown of subjects' retings by dictionary type, choice and learner level

Some combinations with monolingual dictionaries are missing from the table, because they did not occur in the sample: for example, no subject at level 1 gave a monolingual dictionary as their first choice, and no subject at level 2 named a monolingual dictionary as any choice. The data are somewhat difficult to assimilate in tabular form, and so the mean ratings are plotted in Figure 4.
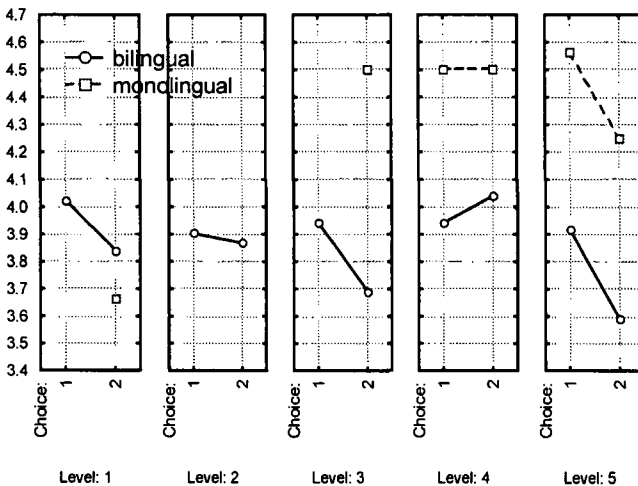

Figure 4: Subjects' dictionary ratings plotted by dictionary type, choice, and learner level

Some of the mean ratings in Figure 4 for monolingual dictionaries are not estimable because these particular combinations of levels did not occur in the sample, and so they are

missing from the plots. For this reason, a complete model with three predictors (type, choice, and level) cannot be evaluated statistically. Looking at the plots, however, two interesting tendencies emerge. Firstly, a tendency for monolingual dictionaries to be rated more highly is reconfirmed here, with the exception of level 1, although this particular mean value only represents three data points, so it should not be taken too seriously. Secondly, first-choice dictionaries appear to be evaluated more highly than second-choice dictionaries, as predicted in Hypothesis 2, with the exception of level 4 subjects, where the reverse tendency is observed, as already noted above. There, it was suggested that this counterintuitive tendency cannot be explained by the involvement of monolingual dictionary ratings, and the graph for level 4 clearly shows that the tendency actually comes from *bilingual* dictionaries, which tend to be given lower ratings by level 4 subjects when named as first choice compared to second choice. A close inspection of the individual responses of level 4 subjects does not shed any further light on why these subjects, when choosing between two bilingual dictionaries, would rate their second choice more highly. Perhaps there are some external factors in the context of the dictionary consultation act that make those learners refer more frequently to a dictionary which is their second favourite, such as when substantial dictionary work is done in the classroom while the best liked dictionary is reserved for the less frequent home use, but this is mere speculation.

References

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