

# **THE EFFECT OF ONLINE DICTIONARIES USAGE ON EFL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS' AUTONOMY**

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## **Abstract**

Due to EFL undergraduate students' ineffective learning strategies, which mirror lack of autonomy, this paper is a pilot study into how use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online can affect undergraduate students' autonomy or self-reliance in a Thai EFL context. The link was selectively integrated in a writing classroom as a tool to improve their English during writing assignments because it appears to be more comprehensive than others. Seventy three students participated in the study and completed a questionnaire based on arguments that new generations or young learners can relate themselves to the link viewed as learning technology and in turn possess positive attitude toward and motivation in learning English autonomously. Although the quantitative results are positive to some extent, they offer some directions for EFL teachers to guide their students in moving toward autonomy. Limitation and recommendations for future study are provided.

**Keywords:** online dictionaries, strategy training, learner autonomy

## **1. Introduction**

Writing is one of the essential skills in language learning. It is common for an EFL instructor who practices teacher-centered approach to correct students' writing errors directly instead of guiding them where and how to correct. On the one hand, this kind of teacher direct feedback can particularly help beginner learners to improve their sentence structures and vocabulary (Ferris, 2002; Miceli, 2006) due to their inadequate language competence for self-correction. On the other hand, it is a kind of passive learning not beneficial for learners since it is an act of copying teacher's correction (Fregeau, 1999), which can stop them from acquiring English. Some studies (e.g. Chatranonth, 2008; Erel & Bulut, 2007) confirmed the negative consequences of the approach.

In contrast with direct feedback, teacher indirect feedback can lead to learner autonomy. It is a kind of learning that determines if learners can achieve their personal goals or not (Benson, 2001). In an EFL writing class, Kulsirisawad (2012) suggests that teachers need to promote learner autonomy using peer feedback rather than direct feedback from

teachers. She argues that the former was an approach that enhanced the process of learning because it engaged learners in activities that further developed their cooperative and creative skills. It is seen as an effective strategy to build EFL students' self-reliance whereas the latter gives rise to rote learning and copying.

In a Thai EFL context, however, assigning students to evaluate their classmate's writing tasks is challenging for certain reasons. First, normally in a language classroom, teachers have mixed-ability students, ranging from low to high. It is not simple to manage the imbalance unless teachers make an intensive lesson plan to train their students to provide feedback to their classmates properly. Second, students may not have confidence in the feedback of their peers because knowledge is culturally acquired from teachers rather than classmates. Third, teachers also need to facilitate their students during pair work.

From the present researcher's personal experience, EFL students often use *Talking Dictionary* through their smart phone for English-Thai and Thai-English translations as parts of their English language learning because it is portable. It only provides translations of different languages, but not pronunciation, grammar and usage. As a result, when it is time for them to write, they tend to translate it from Thai to English, which often produces incorrect sentences and conveys wrong messages. Many of them appear to lack self-confidence as they would ask some classmates sitting next to them for help without directions.

Writing in a first language or ESL or EFL takes practices over a period of time. One of the reasons is that it is a skill learned in a formal setting. Cummins (1984) posited that teachers could not expect their learners to be fluent in writing although they were competent in speaking. In fact, they necessarily foster learner autonomy because it can promote EFL learners' proficiency (Dafei, 2007; Nguyen Trong Nhan & Thi Lai, 2012). The researcher's goal was therefore to assist the total number of students (N = 73), majoring in English and enrolled in a report writing class during August and December 2014, in moving toward learner autonomy. For one thing, the students tended to ask their classmates for help when they were assigned to write a paragraph about something they liked during the first week. They also tended to use Talking Dictionary Application on their smart phone for Thai-English and English-Thai translations, which did not help them much and resulted in errors with incorrect verb patterns. The errors were mainly caused by literal translation from Thai to English. Asking classmates or using a dictionary and translating are the students' learning strategies which appear to be inadequate and need to be developed.

It appears that few studies investigated how use of online dictionary along with teacher indirect feedback can foster EFL students' autonomy in a writing class. The

researcher selected Cambridge Dictionaries Online (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/>) because it is a more comprehensive resource than other online publications. It also offers virtual *English Grammar Today* (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/>), *Business English* (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/business-english/>) and *Essential British English* (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/essential-british-english/>).

The use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online was integrated into the class to help the students to be self-reliant because it is a kind of learning technology young students as digital natives may find it relevant to their daily life and may consequently be motivated (Tananuraksakul, 2014) to learn English through the link on a smart phone and in turn better develop their learning strategies. By means of integration, the link was introduced and demonstrated how to use it through lesson plans during the second week, and the use was reinforced throughout the semester after the researcher gave indirect feedback on writing assignments to the students. Although teacher indirect feedback is part of the treatment, this present study primarily aims to quantitatively investigate in what way the Cambridge Dictionaries Online can affect the students' autonomy and how the link usage enhances the students' attitudes toward and motivation in learning English.

## **2. Relevant literature review and hypotheses**

The study involves the use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online and teacher indirect feedback to foster undergraduate students' autonomy when they write in English. Autonomy is viewed to be highly important for higher education (Arnold, 2006) and foster lifelong learning skills (Little, 2001). It was first conceptualized in a European context referring to learners' ability to take responsibility of their own learning (Holec, 1981: 3). The concept has since been expanded from "a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person (Dam et al., 1990: 102) to "an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning" (Dickinson 1995:167) and to the ability to take control of one's own learning (Benson, 2001), to name a few. In this paper, however, it refers to the "*direction of change – towards student self reliance*", the most important for autonomy in learning (Boud, 1988: 22), so that their learning strategies can be better developed.

Autonomy is found interrelated with intrinsic motivation as they nourish one another (Little, 2006). Both are key factors to success in language learning and learners can develop skills in autonomy through training (Benson, 2001). EFL teachers play a vital role to train such skills to their students as a guide and a facilitator in their learning process because

autonomy is not a product but a process, requiring motivation, learner needs, learning strategies and language awareness (Thanasoulas, 2000). They need to be creative in their teaching strategies so as to engage their students in learning and promote them to be autonomous learners (Hasan, 2011). Moreover, providing their students with explicit feedback on their writing and positive reinforcement enhance their motivation in improving their writing skills (Srichanyachon, 2012).

Past studies show that indirect teacher feedback can enhance learners' English writing skills better than direct feedback. For example, Chandler (2003) found that indirect teacher feedback with underlined errors and self-correction requirement helped university students from East Asian backgrounds write with more accuracy. In contrast, learners at a tertiary level receiving teacher direct feedback produced more run-on sentences and sentence fragments (Chatranonth, 2008) and more grammatical errors (Erel & Bulut, 2007) than the one receiving teacher indirect coded feedback. Some studies also indicated that a mixed use of treatments could enhance learners' ability in error correction. For example, Ito (2014) investigated how both corpus consultation and coded/uncoded indirect feedback could improve lower level learners' Japanese. It was found that learners liked the use of both corpus consultation and coded/uncoded indirect feedback, which helped them correct their writing errors better.

Since autonomy is essential for language learners' achievement and it takes time to develop, several studies have sought to shed light on how to promote language learners' autonomy in different social contexts. For example, in Hong Kong, Chuk (2004) adopted Exploratory Practice as a tool to help her students develop a better sense of learner autonomy. In China, Li (2009) developed learner autonomy in learning EFL by assisting students to define their goals, draw up plans, and work towards them. In Thailand, Darasawang and Reinders (2010) used an online language support system in the self-access center. There is no evidence of using online dictionaries and teacher indirect feedback as tools to promote learner autonomy in a writing class.

In this study, the researcher's role was to guide EFL students to develop their learning strategies and move toward learner autonomy or self-reliance during writing the assignments by giving them indirect feedback and having them check verb patterns and sentence examples with Cambridge Dictionaries Online. If they like to use the link as parts of their English writing, they will have positive attitudes towards the usage and learning and gain motivation in learning the language, which can concurrently encourage them to use the link as a tool to help them write better. The arguments prompt the researcher to hypothesize the following:

1. Online dictionaries can help the students to learn English autonomously.

2. Online dictionaries can promote the students' positive attitude toward learning English.
3. Online dictionaries can promote the students' motivation in learning English.

### 3. Methodology

The study began with an overview of how to use Cambridge Dictionaries Online for writing correct sentences in week 2. Initially, the students must find a main verb, normally from Talking Dictionary Application on their smart phone, and then check its pattern(s) in the Cambridge Dictionaries Online that offers verb patterns and example sentences. For example, 'consider' is a verb and has different meanings. If it is used as an 'opinion', *to believe someone or something to be, or think of him, her, or it as something*, it can be followed by an object + a noun or an adjective (verb pattern), or passive + an object + to infinitive, or that + clause, as illustrated in Figure 1. The 'Grammar' box also gives more details of verb patterns of 'consider' and how it is used differently from 'regard' although both are synonymous as shown in Figure 2. The students can use the patterns and the example sentences as writing models.

#### English definition of "consider"

## consider

**verb** (OPINION) UK US /kən'sɪd.ə/ /-ə/

**B2** [T often + obj + (to be) + noun/adj] **to believe someone or something to be, or think of him, her, or it as something:**

*He is currently **considered** (to be) the best British athlete.* Example

*We don't consider her suitable for the job.*

[passive + obj + to infinitive] *It is considered bad manners in some cultures to speak with your mouth full of food.*

*I consider myself lucky that I only hurt my arm in the accident.*

*Do you consider him a friend of yours?*

[+ (that)] *She considers (that) she has done enough to help already.*

**be highly/well considered**

**> to be very much admired:**

*I've never enjoyed her books, but I know she's very highly considered.*

Grammar: **Consider or regard?** Consider and regard can both mean 'believe' or 'realise' or 'understand'. When they mean 'believe' or 'realise' or 'understand', we don't often use the continuous forms. ... **See more**

(Definition of consider verb (OPINION) from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge University Press)

#### More definitions for "consider"

All **Idioms**

**consider** verb (POSSIBILITY)

**consider** verb (SUBJECT/FACT)

**consider** verb (CARE ABOUT)

**consider it done** idiom

[See all results »](#)

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#### Definitions of "consider" in other dictionaries

**American English** **Learner's**

#### Translations of "consider"

**in Spanish** **in Arabic** **in Catalan**

**in Chinese (Simplified)**

**in Chinese (Traditional)** **in Italian**

**in Japanese** **in Korean** **in Polish**

**in Portuguese** **in Russian**

**in Turkish** **in French** **in German**

**SMART Thesaurus: Liked, or not liked, by many people**

"consider": synonyms and related words:

Figure 1. Verb patterns and example sentences of 'consider'.

The screenshot shows the Cambridge Dictionary entry for "Consider or regard?". The page is titled "Consider or regard?" and is part of the "English Grammar Today" series. It explains that both verbs can mean 'believe', 'realise', or 'understand'. The entry is divided into two main sections: "Consider" and "Regard".

**Consider**

Consider takes several different patterns.

**Consider + that-clause**  
When you **consider** that she was very scared, her story is even more remarkable.

**Consider + object + to be**  
They **consider** him to be the best chef in the country.

**Consider + object + to have**  
The ministry of trade **considered** the company to have the best vision for exports.

**Warning:**  
We don't use **as** with **consider**.  
We **consider** this to be a very serious issue.  
Not: ~~We consider this as a very serious issue.~~

**Regard**

We often use **regard** in the phrase 'regard as': **regard** (+ object) + **as** + noun phrase or adjective phrase:  
The United Nations **regard** human rights as their main priority.  
Alexander Graham Bell is **regarded** as the inventor of the telephone.  
Do you **regard** their behaviour as good or bad?

**Typical error**

- We don't usually use the continuous forms of **consider** and **regard**.  
When you ~~are considering~~ that he was too young, you have to blame his parents.  
Not: ~~When you are considering that he was too young ...~~
- The government **regards** the economy as a main priority.  
Not: ~~The government is regarding the economy ...~~

Footnote: ("Consider or regard?" from English Grammar Today © Cambridge University Press. Need grammar practice? Try English Grammar Today with Workbook.)

**Browse**

- Conjunctions
- Conjunctions: adding
- Conjunctions: causes, reasons, results and purpose
- Conjunctions: contrasting
- Conjunctions: time
- Consider or regard?**
- Consist, comprise or compose?
- Content or contents?
- Contractions
- Contrasts
- Could

**Word of the Day**  
**oil slick**  
a layer of oil that is floating over a large area of the surface of the sea, usually because an accident has caused it to escape from a ship or container  
**Word of the Day**

**Blog**  
Read our blog about how the English language behaves

Figure 2. Verb patterns and usage of 'consider' and 'regard'.

From Week 3 onward, the researcher reinforced the use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online in the classroom and gave the students indirect feedback on their writing errors (e.g. please check verb patterns of 'expect', 'make', 'marry' and 'concentrate'). The students then rewrote sentences, which were later checked and recorded. If they could not rewrite correctly, the researcher would further guide them individually and recorded the progress exemplified in Table 1.

Table 1. Examples of students' writing errors and their re-written versions.

Student	Writing Errors	Brush up 1 (Independent Use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online)	Brush up 2 (The instructor's assistance)
1	1. Students must organization manage class schedule for learn. 2. When studying in class, they must to intended. 3. They must adjust and responsibility themselves.	1. Student must organize class schedule management for learning. 2. When studying in class, they must intended. 3. They must adjust to responsibility themselves.	1. Students must organize their class schedule. 2. When studying in class, they must intend. 3. They must adjust to new environments.
2	1. I expect that when I graduated, I would like to learn in Chinese language. 2. I'm not expect in the work plan because I can't choose a work that I hope.	1. I expect to graduate in two years. Then I would like to learn in Chinese language. 2. I don't expect that my future plan will come true because I can't choose a job.	1. I expect to graduate in two years. Then I plan to learn Chinese. 2. –
3	I want to graduate bachelor's degree.	I want to graduate from Huachiew Chalermprakiet University.	I want to graduate with a bachelor's degree.
4	1. I don't have a certainly plan in the future. 2. This work it make me love English language more than the past.	1. I don't have a certainly plan what I want to do in the future. 2. This work it makes me love English...	1. I don't have a certain plan about what I want to do in the future. 2. This work makes me love English.
5	1. I will working for three years. 2. I will make own business job. 3. We will make happiness with. 4. If I married with someone, we will make a kids.	1. I will work for three years. 2. I will be make own business. 3. We will be make happiness with. 4. If I marry someone, we will have children.	1. – 2. I will own a business. 3. We will have happiness together. 4. If I marry, I plan to have children.
6	They provided information everything when I confuse.	They provide useful information about education, society and adapting.	They provide useful information about education, society and adaptation into social environments.
7	1. I always concentrate at teacher and lessons. 2. Keep myself concentrate on every subjects.	1. I always keep an eye on teacher and lessons. 2. Care for on every subjects.	1. I always concentrate on lectures. 2. I keep concentrating on every subject.
8	1. It make me can use my experience. 2. I want my family rest. 3. I want they happiest. 4. I want they be proud of me.	1. It makes me can use my experience. 2. I want to my family rest. 3. I want they were happiest. 4. I want them to be proud of me.	1. It makes me use my experience. 2. I want my family to rest. 3. I want them to be happy. 4. -
9	1. I'm come from Phathalung. 2. My plan to study the end, and I have a job. 3. I will determine study. 4. I want a teacher. 5. I want successful in the future.	1. I come from Phatthalung. 2. My plan graduated from the HCU. 3. I will be determine study. 4. I want to be a teacher. 5. I want to success in the future.	1. – 2. I plan to graduate from the HCU. 3. I determine to study. 4. – 5. I want to succeed in the future.
10	1. I'm study in Huachiew Chalermprakiet University major of Liberal Arts in English 2. I want to be my own business. 3. I will start to make a family and planned to have two children. 4. I think this work is make a lot of	1. I am majoring in English at Huachiew Chalermprakiet University. 2. I want to own a business. 3. I will make a family and planned to have two children. 4. I think this work makes a lot of	1. – 2. – 3. I will start a family and plan to have two children.

	money for me.	money for me.	4. –
11	1. I would like to teacher. 2. I love to learn give with pupil. 3. My mother would like give me government officer 1 person. 4. I have 1 sister person but when I grow at present, I start like secretary at work in office. 5. I want make give my dream is true.	1. I want to be a teacher. 2. I like to teach with the kids. 3. My mother wants me to work in the office. 4. I have a sister, but when I grow up, I like to work in the office. 5. I want to make my dream come true.	1. – 2. I like to teach kids. 3. My mother wants me to work in the government office. 4.- 5. –
12	1. In the future I want to successful about education and have a good job. 2. I want to take care my parents by myself.	1. In the future, I want to succeed in study and have a good job. 2. I want to take care of my parents by myself.	1. – 2. –
13	1. I want to have a stable career for take care my parents. 2. They've gave me courage. 3. I want to successful about education and attention to work for my family business.	1. I want to have a stable career to take care of my parents. 2. They make me bravely. 3. I want to succeed in education and attend to work for my family business.	1. – 2. They make me brave. 3. –
14	1. It's a thinking of kid. 2. I can't to travel. 3. We don't know how to succeed about out plans.	1. It's a very childish thinking. 2. I can't travel. 3. We don't know how to succeed in our plans.	1. – 2. – 3. –
15	1. I study English major. 2. I decide follow my dream.	1. I'm an English major. 2. I decide to follow my dream.	1. – 2. –
16	1. After I graduate in bachelor's degree, I will study in master's degree. 2. Because if I wait to study later, surely that I'll lazy.	1. After I graduate bachelor's degree, I will study master's degree. 2. If I study later, surely that I'll be lazy.	1. After I graduate with a bachelor's degree, I will study for a master's degree. 2. –
17	1. They must to teach everything. 2. I have plan to intend for good work. 3. I must to intend and practice.	1. They have to teaching. 2. I have to planning intended for good work. 3. I am intend and practice.	1. They have to teach. 2. I intend to work. 3. I intend to practice.
18	1. I like to study English so much because I could make a good point. 2. It's make my a quality of life is better. 3. I can make my plan is true.	1. I like to study English so much because I can get the good point. 2. It makes my quality of life better. 3. I'll make the plan come true.	1. I like to study English so much because I get high scores. 2. – 3. –
19	1. My family supports me about working English subject for using in the work. 2. If I success this career, my family prides me. 3. I watch to English movie and listen to English music.	1. My family supported me about working English subject for using in the work. 2. If I succeed this career, my family would be pride of me. 3. I watch English movie and listen to English music.	1. My family supported me to study English. 2. If I succeed in this career, my family would be proud of me. 3. –
20	1. I studying in English major. 2. I am try to improve my English. 3. I so happy. 4. I think the guide occupation it can earn so many. 5. It can work and travel and earn so many.	1. I am majoring in English. 2. I am trying to improve my English. 3. I am so happy. 4. I think I will earn a lot of money. 5. I expect to earn a lot of money.	1. – 2. – 3. – 4. – 5. –

At the end of the semester, the researcher asked the students to complete a 5-Likert scale questionnaire (from strongly disagree to strongly agree) and assured them that the

completion would not affect their final grade at all. The questionnaire consists of two parts: personal information and views on the use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online. The second part comprises seven items constructed based on the arguments that Cambridge Dictionaries Online is new technology that young students may identify themselves with because it is trendy, practical and useful and it in turn motivates them to learn (Tananuraksakul, 2014) to write in English independently and better. Once they like to use Cambridge Dictionaries Online, they will plan to use it continually to improve their English writing skills.

After the number of 73 students, who were purposively selected, had completed the questionnaire, the researcher used SPSS version 11 for data analysis. Then the researcher interpreted the means and descriptions based on the descriptive scale and rating below:

<b>5-rating Scale</b>	<b>Descriptive Rating</b>
4.20 – 5.00	strongly agree
3.40 – 4.19	agree
2.60 – 3.39	neutral
1.80 – 2.59	disagree
1.00 – 1.79	strongly disagree

#### 4. Results and discussion

Seventy three students completed the questionnaire. Based on its first part, the students' ages range between 20 and 25, considered young as digital natives (Prensky, 2001). One person (1.4%) never used Cambridge Dictionaries Online while 62 of them (84.9%) sometimes used it. Eight (11%) used it all the time. The second part asked the students about their opinions on Cambridge Dictionaries Online Usage, and the results are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' opinions about the use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online.

<b>Statements</b>	<b>Means</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
1. I find Cambridge Dictionaries Online useful for my writing assignments.	4.1370	.69352	Agree
2. I find Cambridge Dictionaries Online practical for my writing assignments.	3.8630	.78731	Agree
3. I find Cambridge Dictionaries Online trendy for my writing assignments.	3.7945	.84916	Agree
4. I like to use Cambridge Dictionaries Online to improve my writing skills.	3.8767	.91204	Agree

5. I am determined to write in English better.	4.1233	.78076	Agree
6. I am determined to learn how to write in English independently.	4.0685	.83879	Agree
7. I plan to use Cambridge Dictionaries Online continually to improve my writing skills.	4.1370	.82184	Agree

Table 2 reveals 73 students' positive views on the use of Cambridge Dictionaries Online as they agree that Cambridge Dictionaries Online is useful, practical and trendy (statements 1, 2, 3), that they are determined to learn how to write in English independently (statement 6) and that they plan to continue to use it to improve their writing skills (statement 7). These findings support the first hypothesis that Cambridge Dictionaries Online can help the students to learn English autonomously to some extent because only eight of them always use the link while 62 sometimes use it. However, when considering a number of students' ability to correct their sentences according to the researcher's indirect feedback using the link shown in Table 1, not many students were able to re-write their sentence correctly on their own (Brush up 1); they needed the researcher's assistance (Brush up 2). This particular finding suggests that students need teachers' guidance in order to foster learner autonomy (Nguyen Cao Thanh, 2012) or self-reliance.

In addition, the students agree that they like to use Cambridge Dictionaries Online to improve their English writing (statement 4) and are also determined to learn English better (statement 5). According to Macmillan English Dictionary (2006), attitudes refer to learners' feelings about something, especially as shown by their behaviors (p.76), and motivation is "a feeling of enthusiasm that makes learners determined to do something" (p.925). These findings confirm the second and third hypotheses respectively that the students have positive attitudes toward using the link as a tool to improve their English and concurrently have motivation in learning English. This confirmation further suggests that there is a relationship between learner autonomy and motivation in learning English (Little, 2006)

## 5. Conclusion

The study mainly examines the ways in which using Cambridge Dictionaries Online affects EFL students' autonomy or self-reliance, attitude toward and motivation in learning English. Although the results are positive to some degree, they offer some directions that the students can identify themselves with the link via their smart phone as a language learning technology and be motivated to learn (Tananuraksakul, 2014), which can further foster their autonomy

and at the same time help develop their learning strategies through mobile assisted language use (MALU - Jarvis and Achilleos, 2013).

Despite the positive outcomes, one of the limitations is the research methodology merely using the quantitative approach. In order to gain more insightful information, a longitudinal study with additional qualitative research approach such as in-depth interviews or focus group is further recommended.

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