

Yan Yan Yeung

Supporting Chinese Learners' Dictionary Preferences

Yan Yan Yueng, a PhD student at Coventry University, explored how Chinese students based at a UK university used a popular bilingual Chinese–English electronic dictionary resource, Youdao. Her main aim was to investigate how useful the resource was in helping the students to navigate language tasks.

The study: After a short initial pilot study with a couple of volunteers to refine her research procedures, she set the 20 participants in her study both receptive and productive language tasks during which they were encouraged to use Youdao. She observed how they used it during the task and followed up with informal interviews.

Errors in the app: Perhaps as anticipated, through the course of the study, she came across numerous issues with the content of the app itself where information was potentially misleading, ambiguous, or just straightforwardly incorrect. These issues led to a mix of responses from the users.

Making it fit regardless: In the face of confusing or incorrect app content, users did their best to fit the information they found to the context at hand, even when this involved considerable mental gymnastics and led to some wildly incorrect interpretations. In post-task interviews, participants sometimes expressed doubts about what they'd found, but blamed the problem not on the quality of the app, but on their own perceived shortcomings as users.

A translation shortcut: For the receptive task, instead of using the app as a conventional dictionary to look up individual words or phrases, some students used it as a machine translation facility, inputting longer sections of text as a shortcut to consciously processing the language for themselves. Yan Yan describes this finding as:

“a rather depressing discovery for me as a researcher, a language teacher, and an experienced language learner. Youdao has created shortcuts for Chinese EFL learners so that they can quickly find solutions they are satisfied with, allowing them to side-step the cognitive process of examining word use in context.”

Productive lucky dip: During the productive writing task, app use led to even more issues, as participants looked up words in Chinese that they wanted to use in their English text. Problems included choosing an incorrect part of speech, opting for translations that didn't match the context or register, or just looking at completely the wrong entry. And frequently, participants didn't look up words at all because they were over-confident in their existing knowledge. These are familiar issues found in previous dictionary use studies, but in this case, were sometimes directly caused or compounded by the errors in the app content.

Conclusions: Yan Yan concludes that the two biggest issues for this group of learners are their over-confidence in their own vocabulary knowledge and their misjudgement of how reliable the information provided by Youdao is. She also highlights the challenges of 'converting' learners away from a quick-fix machine translation approach:

“It is a frustrating fact, but also the reality that, with advancing technology, it will become tougher to ‘convert’ users of machine translators back to using the electronic dictionary as a dictionary, especially those learners with lower motivation. Thus, it is essential to enhance learners’ critical thinking ability and awareness of potentially false or problematic information in their preferred electronic dictionary.”
