

# Investigating EFL Students' and Instructors' Perceptions of Dictionary Usage in Writing Assessment

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## Abstract

In this mixed-methods study we investigated the attitudes of 32 students and 34 teachers from a Saudi Arabian university toward dictionary use in writing assessments in EFL settings. We aimed to discern their views on the role of dictionaries in writing assessments and overall language proficiency. We asked both students and instructors to answer a 4-point Likert-style questionnaire to investigate their perceptions about using dictionaries in writing assessments. We interviewed participants later for further investigation. After analyzing the data both quantitatively and qualitatively, we found that students generally perceived dictionary use as being beneficial by enhancing vocabulary acquisition, improving writing performance and accuracy, and fostering positive attitudes toward writing without significantly affecting comprehension or focus on content. In contrast, teachers were skeptical, doubting dictionaries' contribution to vocabulary development, writing quality, and accuracy. They also raised concerns about dictionaries' not promoting positive writing attitudes or independent learning and potentially slowing down the writing process due to ineffective usage. Our study highlights a notable discrepancy between students' positive perceptions and teachers' reservations about dictionary use in language assessments. It suggests a need for further research to understand dictionaries' impact on language learning and assessment outcomes, acknowledging the limitations of the study and the need for broader exploration in diverse educational contexts to resolve these differing views.

**Keywords:** dictionary use, EFL students, EFL instructors, writing assessment

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Exploration of the Problem

Dictionaries are vital resources for students of English as a foreign language (EFL) or of English as a second language (ESL). However, there are various viewpoints on the pedagogical and assessment-related value of dictionaries. Students appear to be more enthusiastic about dictionary use because of the support (in terms of definitions and synonyms in particular) that dictionaries provide (Fogal, 2022; Issa et al., 2022; Kendall & Khuon, 2023; Saha, 2022; Staples et al., 2023; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang & Zou, 2023). Teachers appear to have mixed views of the usefulness of dictionary usage (Ahmed, 2019; Brockman, 2020; Cao et al., 2019; Graham, 2019; Iswandari & Jiang, 2020; Rassaei, 2021; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Strobl et al., 2019; Tsuroyya, 2020).

### 1.2 Research Questions

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are students' attitudes and perceptions regarding using dictionaries in writing assessments?
- (2) How do instructors view the influence of dictionary usage on students' writing assessments and overall language proficiency?
- (3) To what extent are there differences in how instructors perceive students' use of dictionaries compared to how students perceive it?

Answering these questions can provide important insights into how the two most important stakeholders in EFL settings—teachers and students—perceive dictionary usage, which, in turn, can provide instructional guidance to teachers.

### *1.3 Literature Review*

EFL literature has a number of focuses when it comes to discussing dictionary use. One positive interpretation is that dictionaries help students acquire new vocabulary, improve spelling, and develop their writing quality (Abbasi et al., 2019; Alhaisoni, 2020; Boonmoh, 2021; El-Sawy, 2019; Pyo, 2020; Zhang et al., 2021). This interpretation is generally positive in its assessment of how dictionaries are useful to EFL students. However, there is a counterpoint that dictionary use can lead students to focus too much on individual words rather than on the entire written product or subcomponents thereof, such as paragraphs; to eschew critical thinking by relying on the dictionary; and to fail to deliver valid assessments, as assessments include the correct, dictionary-free use of spelling and vocabulary (Abbasi et al., 2019; Al-Khresheh & Al-Ruwaili, 2020; Alhaisoni, 2020; Alhatmi, 2019; Altakhaineh & Shahzad, 2020; Arfae, 2020; El-Sawy, 2019; Lin & Lin, 2019; Lin, 2019; Pyo, 2020).

A third major theme in the literature is that dictionaries are properly used in certain contexts, often under teacher guidance, and cannot be uniformly described as either good or bad for improving the writing of EFL students (Abbasi et al., 2019; Ahmed, 2019; Al-Khresheh & Al-Ruwaili, 2020; Alahmadi & Foltz, 2020; Alhatmi, 2019; Duggan, 2019; El-Sawy, 2019; Lin & Lin, 2019; Lin, 2019; Rao, 2019). There is also evidence that students are more positively oriented than teachers toward dictionary use, often because students lack confidence in themselves (Fogal, 2022; Issa et al., 2022; Kendall & Khuon, 2023; Saha, 2022; Staples et al., 2023; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang & Zou, 2023), and teachers wish to see students work harder to absorb vocabulary and spelling (Ahmed, 2019; Brockman, 2020; Cao et al., 2019; Graham, 2019; Iswandari & Jiang, 2020; Rassaei, 2021; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Strobl et al., 2019; Tsurouya, 2020).

One of the gaps in the literature is a direct comparative assessment of teacher and student perceptions of the usefulness of dictionaries. Obtaining this information from teachers and students at a single institution can show how far apart instructors and learners might be on the topic of using dictionaries in the classroom. Such insights can help teachers assess and calibrate how the students and their peers feel and can change their outlooks accordingly. Given that writing is the most difficult component of EFL and ESL (Ahmed, 2019; Hamidnia et al., 2020; Karim & Nassaji, 2020; Kuyyogsuy, 2019; Liu & Wu, 2019; López-Serrano et al., 2019; Ma, 2020; Ngui et al., 2020; Tsurouya, 2020), such findings would be significant for practice.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1 Participants*

The student participants were 32 undergraduates studying English as a major in a public university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Participants were enrolled into two sections, and no specific criteria or tests were used to place participants into their corresponding sections, as they were allowed to register randomly in any section until the maximum number of 20 students was reached. After that, the two sections were randomly assigned to the instructor/researcher by the English Language Department to teach them a writing course. Regarding their level of proficiency, all participants had to score 4.5 or higher in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to join the English language program, which is an intermediate level of English, or equivalent to B1 in the Common European Framework of References (CEFR). They had taken two courses in essay writing previously, and this was their third course at the time the study was conducted. All participants were females, in their early 20s as undergraduates.

As for the participants in the instructors' questionnaire, 34 instructors were teaching writing courses at the time of the study. All were from the same public university in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and they were non-native speakers of English. They were both male and female.

### *2.2 Procedure*

The students were allowed to use hard-copy dictionaries in their writing assessments, as online dictionaries were not allowed, according to department restrictions. Afterward, they were asked to answer a 4-point Likert-style questionnaire to investigate their perceptions about using dictionaries in writing assessments. We interviewed them later to explore the types and purposes of usage and whether their usage was affected by their performance in the assessment. The interview was conducted through open-ended questions delivered via Google Forms. The sessions of their writing assessments were one and two hours. They were asked to write a five-paragraph essay in each assessment.

The instructors were also asked to answer a 4-point Likert-style questionnaire to investigate their perceptions about using dictionaries in writing assessments. We interviewed the instructors later to further investigate their beliefs about the research questions, using open-ended questions that were delivered through Google Forms.

### 2.3 Instruments

We administered a 4-point Likert-scale questionnaire to examine students' and instructors' evaluation of the usage of dictionaries in writing assessments. According to Dörnyei & Taguchi (2009), this questionnaire design could encourage participants to express their opinions. The study questionnaires for students and instructors were mainly adapted from Alhatmi (2019), with adaptations informed by the literature. The students' questionnaire consisted of 14 items. Using Cronbach's alpha, the reliability of the questionnaire was found to be 0.81, which is sufficiently high for research purposes (Natrella, 2013).

The instructors' questionnaire consisted of 16 items. Using Cronbach's alpha, we found the reliability of the questionnaire to be 0.79, which is sufficiently high for research purposes (Natrella, 2013). As for the interview, we asked students to answer two questions: (1) How has permitting dictionary use positively impacted your writing performance and overall learning experience during writing assessments? (2) Share your opinions on the challenges and difficulties that you have faced while using dictionaries in writing assessments and how they have affected the assessment process and language learning.

We also asked instructors to answer two questions: (1) From your experience, how has permitting dictionary use positively impacted students' writing and their overall learning experience during assessments? (2) Can you share your insights on the potential challenges and drawbacks associated with allowing dictionaries in writing assessments and how they may affect the assessment process and student learning? Both the questionnaires and interview questions were provided to participants via Google Forms.

To validate the questionnaires, we cross-checked the two faculty members holding PhDs in applied linguistics and having experience in writing instruction. We made modifications based on their comments alleging lack of clarity or redundancy. We conducted a pilot test afterward on a small sample of participants (students and instructors) using convenience sampling. All participants completed the questionnaires without reporting any issues.

We adhered to ethical considerations, with all participants receiving information on the study and providing informed consent. Additionally, we implemented measures to ensure confidentiality of the collected data.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 RQ1

RQ1 read: What are students' attitudes and perceptions regarding using dictionaries in writing assessments? RQ1 was answered using (a) descriptive statistics for survey items, (b) a one-sample t test to identify the survey items with which students agreed and disagreed most, and (c) an integrated discussion.

Here are the items with which students agreed:

- (1) I believe that using dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful.
- (2) Using dictionaries in writing assessments enhances my vocabulary acquisition.
- (3) Dictionary use leads to improved performance in writing assessments and better writing pieces.
- (4) Dictionary use increases the accuracy of my written work.
- (5) Using dictionaries in assessments helps me to have a positive attitude toward writing.

Here are the items with which students disagreed:

- (1) Using dictionaries in writing assessments can lead to a loss of comprehension as students may rely on dictionary definitions instead of critical thinking.
- (2) Allowing dictionaries may encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than the overall content and structure of their writing.
- (3) Students might engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding.
- (4) Allowing dictionaries may raise questions about the validity of the assessment, as it is meant to measure students' abilities without external aid.

Therefore, students had a highly positive assessment of dictionary use.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics, RQ1

Prompt	Mean Agreement	Standard Deviation
I believe that using dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful.	3.47	0.95
Using dictionaries in writing assessments enhances my vocabulary acquisition.	3.31	1.03
Dictionary use leads to improved performance in writing assessments and better writing pieces.	3.34	0.91
Dictionary use increases the accuracy of my written work.	3.31	0.97
Using dictionaries in assessments helps me to have a positive attitude toward writing.	3.28	0.88
Dictionaries use supports my training and fosters independent learning.	3.19	0.93
Dictionary use aids me in understanding words in context, improving my comprehension.	3.22	0.91
Using dictionaries in writing assessments can lead to a loss of comprehension as students may rely on dictionary definitions instead of critical thinking.	2.56	1.01
Students may misinterpret dictionary entries, leading to errors in their written work.	2.78	0.83
Too much use of dictionaries during assessments can hinder the fluency and coherence of students' writing.	2.81	0.86
Students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.	2.91	0.89
Allowing dictionaries may encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than the overall content and structure of their writing.	2.72	0.92
Students might engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding.	2.69	0.78
Allowing dictionaries may raise questions about the validity of the assessment, as it is meant to measure students' abilities without external aids.	2.47	1.02

Table 2. One-Sample t-Test Results, RQ1 (Test Value = 3)

Prompt	t	p
I believe that using dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful.	2.79	< .05
Using dictionaries in writing assessments enhances my vocabulary acquisition.	1.72	< .05
Dictionary use leads to improved performance in writing assessments and better writing pieces.	2.71	< .05
Dictionary use increases the accuracy of my written work.	1.83	< .05
Using dictionaries in assessments helps me have a positive attitude toward writing.	1.79	< .05
Dictionaries usage supports my training and fosters independent learning.	1.14	.132
Dictionary use aids me in understanding words in context, improving my comprehension.	1.37	0.91
Using dictionaries in writing assessments can lead to a loss of comprehension as students may rely on dictionary definitions instead of critical thinking.	-2.44	< .05
Students may misinterpret dictionary entries, leading to errors in their written work.	-1.49	0.073
Too much use of dictionaries during assessments can hinder the fluency and coherence of students' writing.	-1.23	0.113
Students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.	-0.59	0.228
Allowing dictionaries may encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than the overall content and structure of their writing.	-1.72	< .05
Students might engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding.	-2.27	< .05
Allowing dictionaries may raise questions about the validity of the assessment, as it is meant to measure students' abilities without external aid.	-2.96	< .05

### 3.2 RQ2

The second research question—How do instructors view the influence of dictionary usage on students' writing assessment and overall language proficiency? (RQ2)—was answered in four steps. First, we presented descriptive statistics for survey items relevant to RQ2. Second, we conducted a one-sample *t* test to identify the RQ2 survey items with which teachers agreed and disagreed most. Third, we aggregated the qualitative survey items for RQ2 into themes. Fourth, we interpreted and discussed the integrated findings for RQ2.

The following prompts show where teachers disagreed through a one-sample *t* test:

- (1) Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments enhances students' vocabulary acquisition.
- (2) Dictionary use leads to improved writing assessments and more polished writing pieces.
- (3) Dictionary use increases the accuracy of students' written work.
- (4) Allowing dictionaries in assessments contributes to learners' positive attitudes toward writing.
- (5) Dictionaries support learners' training and foster independent learning.
- (6) Dictionaries aid students in understanding words in context, improving their comprehension.
- (7) I believe that allowing dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful for the students.

And here is the item with which teachers agreed:

(1) Students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.

Our integrated analysis of these findings is that teachers did not believe dictionaries to be helpful for students, for the multitude of reasons listed above. The qualitative findings triangulated these insights in the sub-theme entitled Challenges in Using Dictionaries.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics, RQ2

Prompt	Mean Agreement	Standard Deviation
Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments enhances students' vocabulary acquisition.	2.56	0.75
Dictionary use leads to improved writing assessments and more polished writing pieces.	2.71	0.76
It increases the accuracy of students' written work.	2.56	0.86
Allowing dictionaries in assessments contributes to positive learners' attitudes toward writing.	2.62	0.78
Dictionaries support learners' training and foster independent learning.	2.68	0.81
It aids students in understanding words in context, improving their comprehension.	2.65	0.81
Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments can lead to a loss of comprehension as students may rely on dictionary definitions instead of critical thinking.	2.85	0.74
Students may misinterpret dictionary entries, leading to errors in their written work.	2.88	0.69
Excessive use of dictionaries during assessments can hinder the fluency and coherence of students' writing.	3.15	0.7
Students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.	3.26	0.51
Allowing dictionaries may encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than the overall content and structure of their writing.	3.03	0.8
Students might engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding.	2.88	0.69
Allowing dictionaries may raise questions about the validity of the assessment, as it is meant to measure students' abilities without external aids.	2.82	0.8
I believe that allowing dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful for the students.	2.56	0.75

Table 4. One-Sample t Test Results, RQ2 (Test Value = 3)

Prompt	t	p (one-tailed)
Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments enhances students' vocabulary acquisition.	-3.45	< .05
Dictionary use leads to improved writing assessments and more polished writing pieces.	-2.26	< .05
It increases the accuracy of students' written work.	-2.99	< .05
Allowing dictionaries in assessments contributes to positive learners' attitudes toward writing.	-2.86	< .05
Dictionaries support learners' training and foster independent learning.	-2.34	< .05
It aids students in understanding words in context, improving their comprehension.	-2.53	< .05
Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments can lead to a loss of comprehension as students may rely on dictionary definitions instead of critical thinking.	-1.15	.134
Students may misinterpret dictionary entries, leading to errors in their written work.	-1.00	.162
Excessive use of dictionaries during assessments can hinder the fluency and coherence of students' writing.	1.22	.115
Students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.	3.02	< .05
Allowing dictionaries may encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than the overall content and structure of their writing.	0.22	.416
Students might engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding.	-1.00	.162
Allowing dictionaries may raise questions about the validity of the assessment, as it is meant to measure students' abilities without external aids.	-1.29	.102
I believe that allowing dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful for the students.	-3.74	< .05

Table 5. Qualitative Themes, RQ2

Theme	Quotes
Use and Effectiveness of Dictionaries	<p>“I highly recommend the use of English–English dictionaries. . . they will have options of synonyms and examples of English words put into contexts.”</p> <p>“I believe students should be allowed to use monolingual English dictionaries only while writing their practice essays.”</p> <p>“I constantly emphasize the use the electronic dictionaries in my classes. The use of dictionaries has improved students’ writing skills.”</p> <p>“If provided guided use or dictionary training, students can make good use of it.”</p> <p>“It is also worth mentioning that using dictionaries is a skill in its own right that needs extensive training.”</p> <p>“Most students are not able to use dictionaries effectively.”</p>
Challenges in Using Dictionaries	<p>“One of the challenges is that dictionaries might distract students and slow down their writing as they spend a lot of time searching for words.”</p> <p>“Most students don’t know how to use the dictionary therefore they will spend a long time to find a single word . . .”</p> <p>“no focus on overall coherence and format”</p> <p>“I think that permitting dictionary use in writing may affect the validity of the assessment because students’ writing would not reflect their actual language proficiency level.”</p>
Impact on Assessment and Learning	<p>“One of the drawbacks is that it may lead to inaccurate assessment, also it may make the writing test less challenging to students so they will not prepare well by revising the most important phrases and vocabulary.”</p> <p>“Writing is mostly about ideas and support, and I don’t see how dictionaries can actually help.”</p> <p>“I didn’t use it before but maybe in the future when it is allowed.”</p>
Influence on the Writing Process	<p>“I allow them to access their phones. I found that better than dictionaries as they will be able to find the words in context.”</p> <p>“It does confuse the students during the assessment period as well as waste their time hovering from one entry to another.”</p> <p>“It will just waste their time looking up words rather than thinking about the ideas and information they should write.”</p> <p>“I think it will be distractive. Students will rely on it which might lead to a decrease in their interest in building their vocabulary.”</p> <p>“It will slow the writing process in general as students spend a lot of time finding out words and their meanings.”</p> <p>“Another way of making dictionaries effective is to have teachers provide a list of words with their meanings attached to an assignment/assessment.”</p>
Alternatives and Suggestions	<p>“I encourage using them during the process of writing. I especially encourage students to use concordancers [sic] as I believe they give students a better understanding of the usage of words in different contexts.”</p> <p>“I would just suggest giving instructions on how and when to use dictionaries in writing classes.”</p> <p>“Students of an average language level may benefit from dictionaries throughout the writing process. It will help them to develop on the grammatical and lexical level but rarely on the stylistic and pragmatic level.”</p>



### 3.3 RQ3

The third research question was as follows: “To what extent are there differences in how instructors perceive the students’ use of dictionaries compared to the students’ perceptions?” This question was simple to answer, as the obvious difference was that students saw dictionary usage positively, whereas teachers saw it negatively.

Table 6. Differences between Students and Teachers

Students Believe	Teachers Believe
(1) Using dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful.	
(2) Using dictionaries in writing assessments enhances vocabulary acquisition.	(1) Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments does not enhance students’ vocabulary acquisition.
(3) Dictionary use leads to improved performance in writing assessments and better writing pieces.	(2) Dictionary use does not lead to improved writing assessments and more polished writing pieces.
(4) Dictionary use increases the accuracy of written work.	(3) Dictionary use does not increase the accuracy of students’ written work.
(5) Using dictionaries in assessments helps to foster positive attitudes toward writing.	(4) Allowing dictionaries in assessments does not contribute to positive learners’ attitudes toward writing.
(6) Using dictionaries in writing assessments does not lead to a loss of comprehension resulting from relying on dictionary definitions instead of critical thinking.	(5) Dictionaries do not support learners’ training and foster independent learning.
(7) Allowing dictionaries does not encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than the overall content and structure of their writing.	(6) Dictionaries do not aid students in understanding words in context or improving their comprehension.
(8) Students do not engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding.	(7) Allowing dictionaries in writing assessments is not helpful for the students.
(9) Allowing dictionaries does not raise questions about the validity of the assessment.	(8) Students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.

## 4. Discussion

The literature has given some indications that EFL students favor dictionary use (Fogal, 2022; Issa et al., 2022; Kendall & Khuon, 2023; Saha, 2022; Staples et al., 2023; Stojanovska-Ilievska, 2023; Xu et al., 2023; Zhang & Zou, 2023), while teachers are less sanguine (Ahmed, 2019; Brockman, 2020; Cao et al., 2019; Graham, 2019; Iswandari & Jiang, 2020; Rassaei, 2021; Selvaraj & Aziz, 2019; Strobl et al., 2019; Tsurroya, 2020). However, these findings are from different contexts. The contribution of our study was to compare teachers and students from the same educational environment. One main implication of the finding that students are much more positively inclined toward dictionary use is that teachers need to work harder to explain why dictionaries should not be used (on assessed papers) and perhaps provide alternative aids. On the other hand, teachers can also leverage the positive orientation of students to integrate dictionary use more thoroughly into assessment, knowing that doing so might positively motivate students.

Our individual findings were as follows. For RQ1, students were found to believe that: (a) using dictionaries in writing assessments is helpful; (b) using dictionaries in writing assessments enhances vocabulary acquisition; (c) dictionary use leads to improved performance in writing assessments and better writing pieces; (d) dictionary use increases the accuracy of written work; (e) using dictionaries in assessments helps foster positive attitudes toward writing; (f) using dictionaries in writing assessments does not lead to a loss of comprehension resulting from relying on dictionary definitions instead of on critical thinking; (g) allowing dictionaries does not encourage students to focus on isolated words rather than on the overall content and structure of their writing; (h) students do not engage in insufficient processing of dictionary information, leading to surface-level understanding; and (i) allowing dictionaries does not raise questions about the validity of the assessment.

The findings for RQ1 can be examined in light of what the existing literature reveals about differences between students and teachers in their assessments of the value of dictionaries. There is a branch of the literature in which the main finding is that teachers do not feel positively about dictionary use, which they consider to be either actively maladaptive or at best not helpful for the task of language learning. In this context, the gap between

students and teachers is not surprising. As Alhaisoni (2020) found, Arabic-speaking students in a Saudi setting tended to use dictionaries solely to look up completely unknown words, which, naturally, they found helpful; however, that study also noted that dictionaries could be used in many other ways, and target language (L2/English) dictionaries possibly represent the most academically promising means of using dictionaries. In Alhaisoni's study, the main way in which Saudi students used dictionaries was to look up Arabic equivalents of English words, and, even when doing so, they often stopped after the first definition instead of reading through all definitions and trying to determine, through context, what the right definition might be. Overall, that study described ways in which dictionaries use substitutes for, rather than augment, true language learning. The same general point was made by Liu and Wu (2019), who discovered that dictionary use was, according to teachers, among the least important factors in the development of writing skills, which they found was better served by interactive feedback from peers and teachers. The discrepancy between teachers and students on this point might be due to students' believing that the use of dictionaries to complete tasks represents a genuine improvement in their writing skills, whereas from teachers' perspectives, true writing-skill acquisition is not dependent on dictionary usage (Liu & Wu, 2019).

For RQ2, we found that teachers believed that (a) allowing dictionaries in writing assessments does not enhance students' vocabulary acquisition; (b) dictionary use does not lead to improved writing assessments and more polished writing pieces; (c) dictionary use does not increase the accuracy of students' written work; (d) allowing dictionaries in assessments does not contribute to positive attitudes toward writing; (e) dictionaries do not support learners' training or foster independent learning; (f) dictionaries do not aid students in understanding words in context or improving their comprehension; (g) allowing dictionaries in writing assessments is not helpful for the students; and (h) students may face difficulties in using dictionaries effectively, which can slow down the writing process.

These findings can be explained by previous findings that, when dictionaries are available to students, they are used superficially, and, therefore, in ways that do not promote learning. In terms of vocabulary, Alhaisoni (2020) reported that Saudi students do not necessarily retain the words they look up in English-to-Arabic dictionaries, both because (a) they do not spend enough time on entries and read all the meanings, and (b) using English-to-English dictionaries is a better way of acquiring new vocabulary. Boonmoh (2021) reached similar conclusions in a study of Thai learners of English, in which students were observed to use dictionaries in an instrumentalist and superficial way, that is, as a rapid means of completing a given academic task, such as a writing task, rather than as part of a more holistic process of language learning. Students often believe that such usage of the dictionary is useful, but teachers disagree, finding that interactive feedback and other methods are better than dictionary usage for skill acquisition (Liu & Wu, 2019).

For RQ3, we concluded that teachers are generally negative about the use of dictionaries, whereas students are generally positive. This aligns with the literature. As the discussions for RQs 1 and 2 explain, students and teachers diverge on their opinions about the usefulness of dictionaries. However, one point that can be emphasized is the possibility that the discrepancy between students and teachers might depend on the language of the dictionary. In several of the studies discussed earlier, teachers were more positive about the use of English-to-English dictionaries. It would be interesting to discover, in the context of future studies, if the language of the dictionary itself makes any difference to the respective attitudes of teachers and students.

## 5. Recommendations of Practice and Further Research

Our study presents valuable insights into the perceptions of both students and teachers regarding the use of dictionaries in EFL writing assessments within a Saudi university context. The following provides a roadmap for practitioners and researchers, offering actionable insights to enhance teaching practices and pave the way for further research.

- (1) Guidelines or workshops for both students and teachers on effective dictionary use should be developed. Emphasis should be placed on strategies for utilizing dictionaries to enhance vocabulary, improve writing performance, and maintain a balance between content comprehension and language accuracy.
- (2) Interventions should be designed to foster positive attitudes toward writing among both students and teachers. The role of dictionaries in empowering learners to express themselves effectively should be emphasized.
- (3) Open and collaborative discussions between students and teachers should be facilitated to address concerns and perceptions regarding dictionary use. A platform for constructive dialogue should be created to bridge the gap in perspectives and develop shared understandings.

(4) Further research exploring context-specific impacts of dictionary use in diverse educational settings should be conducted. Variations in perceptions across different contexts should be understood, and pedagogical approaches should be tailored accordingly.

(5) Longitudinal studies should be conducted to explore the sustained impact of dictionary use on vocabulary development. The influence of continued exposure to dictionaries on students' lexical skills over an extended period should be assessed.

(6) The role of technological dictionaries (e.g., digital, or online dictionaries), as compared to traditional ones, should be investigated. How the format of dictionaries affects perceptions and usage patterns among students and teachers needs to be explored.

(7) How teachers' perceptions of dictionary use evolve over time should be explored. Follow-up studies should be conducted to track changes in attitudes and instructional approaches after the implementation of training or interventions.

## 6. Limitations of the Study

(1) The study's sample size, consisting of 32 students and 34 teachers from a specific Saudi university, may limit the generalizability of findings to a broader context. The results may not fully capture the diversity of attitudes present in different educational institutions or cultural settings.

(2) The reliance on a 4-point Likert-style questionnaire could introduce response bias, and the predetermined response scale might not encompass the nuanced spectrum of attitudes. Additionally, the self-reporting nature of the questionnaire may be subject to participants' interpretation biases.

(3) The study primarily focuses on individual perceptions of students and teachers. The complex dynamics within teacher-student interactions, such as the influence of teaching methods and instructional strategies, are not extensively explored.

(4) The study primarily focuses on the perceived benefits and concerns related to dictionary use. Additional variables that might influence attitudes, such as individual learning styles or technological preferences, are not extensively explored.

## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to answer three questions: (1) What are students' attitudes and perceptions regarding using dictionaries in writing assessments? (2) How do instructors view the influence of dictionary usage on students' writing assessments and overall language proficiency? (3) To what extent are there differences in how instructors perceive the students' use of dictionaries compared to the students' perceptions? Our main finding was that students approve of using dictionaries, but teachers do not. Future studies should focus on how and why teachers and students differ in their understanding of the usefulness of dictionaries. The current study was limited by sample size, the lack of a longitudinal approach, and the lack of rich qualitative data, all of which can be corrected going forward. The qualitative data solicited from students were particularly limited, which is why they were not included in this study. The qualitative findings from teachers were richer but still limited in terms of the themes they illustrated. Richer data might be collected by interviewing teachers and students rather than asking them to fill out online forms.

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