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DOI: 10.55804/jtsu2346-8149.2025.09.09

Research on Dictionary Use in Teaching Languages (Findings of the Survey Conducted with School Teachers)

Abstract

This article presents the findings of a study examining the use of dictionaries in teaching both Georgian and foreign languages in schools. The research involved teachers of Georgian and several foreign languages—including English, German, French, Spanish, and Russian—working in public schools in Tbilisi. Research on dictionary use dates back to the 1960s, with numerous international studies highlighting persistent challenges and shortcomings in dictionary utilisation (Barnhart, 1962; Quirk, 1973). Many scholars have concluded that the culture of dictionary use is in decline, a trend that carries negative pedagogical and linguistic implications (Gouws, 2022).

Georgia mirrors this global trend. Studies conducted within the country have revealed that many users lack fundamental dictionary skills, which has contributed to the growing influence of English on the Georgian language, including the spread of English-derived barbarisms and calques (Margalitadze, 2020). Drawing on the author's experience as a public-school English teacher, this study arises from recognising these challenges. Informal discussions with colleagues prompted the development of a survey for language teachers to understand their perspectives on fostering dictionary-use skills and identify factors contributing to the decline in dictionary literacy.

The study employs the methodology developed by Hungarian researcher P. Márkus, who investigated dictionary use among Hungarian students and teacher trainees of English and German (P. Márkus et al., 2023). For this research, Márkus's questionnaire was translated into Georgian and adapted to reflect the specific context of Georgian schools and the challenges unique to dictionary use in Georgia. Consequently, this study represents one of the first systematic attempts to examine dictionary use in language teaching in Georgian schools.

Keywords: *dictionary use, educational process, foreign language, language teaching, dictionary-use skills*

1. Introduction

Research on dictionary users is crucial to theoretical lexicography (Béjoint, 2010). Although this area of study was established in the 1960s, English lexicographer Samuel Johnson highlighted its importance in the 18th century (1755). Since then, numerous experiments have been conducted across various countries to examine this issue from different perspectives. One primary aim has been to assess

users' attitudes towards dictionaries and consider their suggestions for improving the quality and structure of these resources (Lew, 2010, 2011; Rundell, 1999, 2016; Levy

& Steel, 2015; Farina et al., 2019). A notable study by Kosem et al. (2019) evaluated respondents from 29 European countries regarding explanatory dictionaries. Additionally, experiments have sought to identify the most effective type of dictionary for learning a foreign language— explanatory, bilingual, or bilingualised (Laufer & Hadar, 1997; Chen, 2007). Researchers have also focused on understanding the dictionary skills of users (Nied Curcio, 2022; Gouws, 2022). Specialised studies have examined the purposes for which users consult dictionaries, such as checking spelling, seeking grammatical information, understanding a word's meaning, or solving crossword puzzles (Barnhart, 1962; Quirk, 1973; Bejoint, 2010).

Scholars believed that empirical studies would significantly advance lexicography. Such research aimed to establish the number of dictionary users and provide a basis for developing dictionaries tailored to users' needs. Emphasizing users' needs and their ability to utilise dictionaries has become vital in designing and planning dictionaries. Studies on dictionary users have revealed that many individuals struggle with the essential skills required for effective dictionary use. For instance, users often fail to recognise the contextual meanings of polysemous words and tend to understand only the first listed meaning in a dictionary entry (Mitchell, 1983; Tono, 1984). They also find it difficult to identify the correct part of speech in context, differentiate homonyms, and select appropriate contextual meanings (Rundell, 1999). Researchers have expressed concerns about a declining culture of dictionary use in several countries, which has negative consequences (Nied Curcio, 2022; Gouws, 2022).

In Georgia, several experiments were carried out to examine the habits of Georgian dictionary users. Some aimed to evaluate the public attitude towards dictionaries, while others investigated the effectiveness of monolingual, bilingual, or bilingualised dictionaries in teaching English (Kapanadze, 2017). Notably, experiments exploring the dictionary-use skills of Georgian learners of English have garnered particular interest (Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023). Results from studies, conducted in Georgia, aligned with those of comparable international studies, indicating that many Georgian learners lack the skills to use dictionaries effectively. They encounter difficulties navigating dictionary entries and are often unaware of the range of information dictionaries offer and the various types available for the Georgian language (Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023). This decline in dictionary culture has brought about numerous challenges for the Georgian language. T. Margalitadze attributes this decline to generational processes affecting modern Georgian, especially the rise of barbarisms and calques influenced by English (Margalitadze, 2018; 2020).

The issue of dictionary use has gained significant relevance due to the challenges faced by the modern Georgian language. This has made dictionary use a key method in the language acquisition framework developed by the National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement. However, merely integrating this method into educational standards will not fully address the problems related to teaching dictionary use in schools.

This study, based on the author's experience as a public school English teacher, reflects an awareness of these challenges. Informal discussions with colleagues led to the development of a survey for language teachers in public schools.

Consequently, this research aims to identify the reasons behind the declining culture of dictionary use in Georgia. The findings are expected to guide future initiatives and foster positive changes within this field. It represents one of the first efforts in Georgia to study dictionary use within school-level language education.

2. Methodology

The survey involving Georgian teachers was conducted using a specially designed questionnaire. The questionnaire is a standard method for examining the use of a dictionary (Welker, 2010). This approach enables researchers to gather responses simultaneously, as the questionnaire was distributed electronically to teachers. The survey was carried out via the Google Forms platform. However, relying solely on quantitative methods is not always enough to thoroughly analyse a problem. Therefore, the study also included qualitative methods by interviewing 12 teachers after they completed the questionnaire (7 English teachers, 4 Russian teachers, and 1 French teacher). The primary focus of the questionnaire is on how teachers use dictionaries and incorporate them into language teaching. It was adapted from a survey conducted in Hungary, which investigated the habits of foreign language learners, particularly Hungarian students learning English and German, in dictionary use (P. Márkus et al., 2023). The questions from the Hungarian study were carefully reviewed, translated into Georgian, and modified to suit the linguistic and educational context of Georgian schools and their users. Notably, Georgian users face specific challenges, such as polysemy, conversion, and homonymy of lexical units (Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023; Khuskivadze, 2024). As a result, targeted questions were added to the Hungarian questionnaire to address these linguistic issues in language teaching.

The questionnaire is divided into three sections: 1) personal details (gender, age, languages taught, years of experience); 2) dictionary use (questions about the types of dictionaries used and their frequency); and 3) the role of dictionaries in the language teaching process, comprising a total of 26 questions. The results were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS version 27.0), calculating mean scores and standard deviations. Cronbach's alpha coefficient (Cohen et al., 2007) was also computed to assess the internal consistency and reliability of the study.

3. Teachers' Survey and Research Results

As mentioned above, the questionnaire used in this study comprises three parts: 1) personal data (gender, age, the language taught, length of service); 2) dictionary usage (questions about the types of dictionaries teachers use and how often they use them); and 3) the role of dictionaries in the language teaching process (26 questions in total). Thirty-eight teachers from public schools in Tbilisi completed the questionnaire. This group included teachers of both Georgian and foreign languages. The demographic breakdown was as follows: 100% female, with age distribution as follows: 3% aged 25-30, 16% aged 30-35, 18% aged 35-40, 29% aged 40-45, and 34% aged 50 and over. The majority of teachers were English language instructors (45%), followed by Russian language teachers (18%), Georgian language teachers (24%), German language teachers (5%), French language teachers (5%), and Spanish language teachers (3%). Concerning teachers' experience, the following questions were asked, along with the corresponding responses (see Table 1):

Table N 1

N	Questions	Positive responses	Negative responses
1	Do you have experience teaching a language (in a public or private school)?	94.7%	5.3%
2	Language teaching, specifically Tutoring	92.1%	7.9%
3	Teaching at the primary level	82.2%	15.8%
4	Teaching at the basic level	94.7%	5.3%
5	Teaching at the secondary level	94.7%	5.3%

The data clearly show that most of the language teachers participating in the study (94.7%) are currently employed in public or private schools, and the majority (92.1%) also have tutoring experience. The study included novice teachers (with up to two years of experience) and experienced educators (with up to 36 years of professional service). Notably, most participants had 11 or more years of experience. Only five out of 38 teachers were novices, indicating that the teachers involved possess substantial teaching experience in languages. This strong representation allows for drawing relevant and reliable conclusions from the findings.

The second part of the questionnaire focused on teachers' use of dictionaries. The first question asked what types of dictionaries teachers currently own: printed, online, or applications installed on their devices. The results showed that most teachers (29) have online dictionaries, although many (20) also own printed dictionaries, as some respondents selected multiple options. However, fewer teachers (10) reported having applications loaded onto their devices.

Subsequent questions were rated on a 5-point scale: 1 to 5 (1 - never, 2 - rarely, 3 – sometimes, 4 - often, 5 - always). The average score from this scale was 3.00, indicating that responses below this threshold tended to be more negative, while those above were more positive.

Another question in this section asked about the types of dictionaries teachers use: explanatory, spelling, foreign word, or bilingual dictionaries. The data revealed that explanatory dictionaries of foreign words were the most frequently used, followed by explanatory dictionaries, bilingual dictionaries, and spelling dictionaries.

When asked which dictionaries and online resources or applications teachers used most often – choosing from printed, electronic, or online dictionaries, applications on their devices, search engines, or machine translators – the results indicated that online dictionaries were used most frequently. Conversely, printed dictionaries and translation applications ranked lowest in usage. The final question presented a list of dictionaries, and teachers were asked to indicate their use. The table 2 outlines these dictionaries and their average ratings on a 5-point scale (1 - never, 2 - rarely, 3

- sometimes, 4 - often, 5 - always).

Table N 2

N	Georgian language dictionaries	Mean score
1	Explanatory Dictionary of the Georgian Language (https://ena.ge/explanatory-online)	2.58
2	Orthographic Dictionary of the Georgian Language (https://ena.ge/orthography-online)	2,47
3	Georgian Spelling Checker "Mtsdarpitkilmdzebni" (https://spellchecker.ge/)	1,97

N		Mean score
1	Russian-Georgian dictionary (http://www.nplg.gov.ge/gwdict/index.php?a=index&d=9)	2.03
2	Russian explanatory dictionary (https://slovarozhegova.ru/)	1.63
3	French explanatory dictionary (https://www.lexilogos.com/francais_dictionnaire.htm)	1.28
4	Italian explanatory dictionary (https://www.lexilogos.com/italien_dictionnaire.htm)	1.16
5	Spanish explanatory dictionaries (https://www.lexilogos.com/espagnol_dictionnaire.htm)	1.23
6	German explanatory dictionary - Duden (https://www.duden.de/woerterbuch)	1.38

N	English language dictionaries	Mean score
1	English-Georgian Learning Dictionary (https://en.bab.la/dictionary/english-georgian/)	2.38
2	The Comprehensive English-Georgian Dictionary (https://dictionary.ge)	2.75
3	Cambridge English Learning Dictionary (https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english)	3.06
4	Longman English Learning Dictionary (https://www.ldoceonline.com)	2.56
5	Oxford English Learning Dictionary (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/)	3.06
6	The Free Dictionary (https://www.thefreedictionary.com)	2.37
7	Urban Dictionary (https://www.urbandictionary.com)	2.32

Based on the results, it appears that the use of different types of dictionaries is relatively infrequent among both foreign and Georgian language teachers. English dictionaries reveal the highest indicator compared to others, which can be explained by the fact that the most significant number of participants in this survey are English language teachers. Among English language dictionaries, the Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries showed high usage rates, likely due to their widespread popularity. We did not calculate the standard deviation for this section of the questionnaire because the questionnaire listed dictionaries in different languages, and teachers of different languages answered them. English teachers did not indicate French, German or other language dictionaries. Also, teachers of Russian, German, French or other languages participating in the survey indicated dictionaries based on their speciality. Therefore, calculating the standard deviation for this part of the questionnaire was irrelevant. In this case, it was more interesting to see the general picture of teachers' use of dictionaries, which, as seen from the average response rate, is more negative than positive.

The third and most significant section of the questionnaire comprises 26 questions focusing specifically on the use of dictionaries within the language teaching process. In this section, teachers were asked to rate their responses on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated 'never', 2 'rarely', 3 'sometimes', 4 'often', and 5 'always'.

Table 3 presents all questions in this part of the questionnaire, as well as the average scores and standard deviations of the responses.

Table N 3

N	Research questions	Mean score	Standard deviation
1.	I use printed dictionaries in my class	2.87	1.38
2.	I use dictionaries in my class to do comprehension exercises.	3.05	1.31
3.	I devote part of my class to developing the skills of finding relevant information in a dictionary.	2.71	1.35
4.	I need training and professional development to teach how to use a dictionary.	1.84	1.13
5.	In my class, I use electronic dictionaries loaded on a computer or other device.	2.97	1.40
6.	In my class, a dictionary is used to look up the meaning of a word.	3.03	1.46
7.	I find it important to introduce my students to the existence of different types of dictionaries in class.	3.53	1.27
8.	I think that I could improve the teaching of dictionary use if appropriate teaching aids and materials were available (for example, special textbooks and exercise books).	3.42	1.24
9.	In my class, we use dictionaries to look up the correct pronunciation of a word.	3.11	1.43

10.	In my class, I introduce students to the overall structure of a dictionary (introduction, abbreviations, appendices, etc.).	2.82	1.35
11.	In my class, we use online dictionaries.	2.95	1.43
12.	In my class, dictionaries are used to look up grammatical information.	2.42	1.33
13.	In the lesson, I will discuss the entry structure of the dictionary and coding systems (for example: accent, transcription, symbols, abbreviations, etc.).	2.63	1.34
14.	The study of dictionary use skills should be included in the national curriculum.	3.00	1.25
15.	The study of dictionary use skills should be included in school curricula.	2.76	1.32
16.	Search engines are used in my lesson (for example, Google)	3.00	1.34
17.	The dictionary is used in my lesson to check the correct spelling of a word.	2.13	1.09
18.	I am not motivated to teach students how to use a dictionary.	2.67	1.24
19.	Machine translators (for example, Google Translate) are used instead of dictionaries in the classroom.	2.26	1.22
20.	In my lesson, dictionaries are used to compose texts and write letters.	2.42	1.18
21.	In my lesson, dictionaries are used to enrich students' vocabulary.	3.26	1.31
22.	In my lesson, students use artificial intelligence to complete various exercises.	2.03	1.10
23.	In my lesson, we work with the help of a dictionary to identify the polysemic meaning of a word in a text.	2.26	1.20
24.	In my lesson, we discuss homonyms with the help of a dictionary.	2.34	1.15
25.	In my lesson, we determine the part of speech meaning of words with the help of a	2.24	1.22
26.	I learned to use a dictionary during a training course, a seminar.	1.34 1	0.71

4. Discussion of the Research Findings

Using a dictionary involves a wide range of skills: understanding spelling and pronunciation, interpreting grammatical information, and engaging with various vocabulary-related aspects – homonymy, conversion, polysemy, collocations, idioms, phrasal verbs, and terminology. It also includes recognizing different types of linguistic labeling – stylistic, temporal, and regional. Each of these components requires systematic instruction and the development of specific, targeted skills.

The analysis of the responses to the questions revealed that the mean score for most answers is marginal, 3.00 or lower, indicating that teachers do not effectively teach students how to use a dictionary. Students are not explained what the structure of a dictionary is, or what are components of a dictionary entry. Students are not taught issues such as pronunciation or spelling of words, grammatical information which can be found in dictionaries. These results align with the findings of the Hungarian study (P. Márkus et al., 2023). While positive feedback was received regarding using a dictionary to look up word meanings or expand vocabulary, the negative responses to questions 23, 24, and 25 suggest that teachers largely overlook topics such as polysemy, homonymy, and conversion. Notably, responses to question 14, which asked whether teaching dictionary skills should be incorporated into the national curriculum, were predominantly negative, with an average score of 3.0. This indicates that teachers do not even consider dictionaries as important resources for teaching languages. Unlike Georgian teachers, their Hungarian colleagues consider it necessary to have a stronger presence of dictionary use in official documents (Márkus et al., 2023). However, the positive responses of Georgian teachers to the statement, “I think I could improve the teaching of dictionary use if appropriate teaching aids and materials (such as special textbooks and exercises) were available,” (question 8) are significant and promising. Hungarian teachers also believe that they can improve teaching of dictionary use with the help of special textbooks and other teaching aids (Márkus et al., 2023).

The standard deviation of responses ranges from 0.71 to 1.46, with most responses exceeding 1, indicating a relatively wide range of opinions among teachers. The reliability and internal consistency of the results from this part of the study, measured by Cronbach's alpha coefficient, was found to be $\alpha = 0.993$. This is a high indicator, reflecting the internal consistency of the questionnaire items, which measure the main research question concerning teachers' use of dictionaries and their perceptions of dictionary usage.

Interviews with Teachers

After completing the questionnaire, informal discussions were held with some of the surveyed teachers. These conversations were collegial rather than conducted in a survey format. Through direct interviews, it was discovered that several questions in the questionnaire intrigued the participants, particularly those regarding specialised textbooks and exercises designed to help teachers develop students' dictionary skills. Teachers also noted that the questionnaire included several questions they had not previously considered, emphasising the importance of dictionaries in language teaching.

Furthermore, many teachers found the questionnaire informative, as it introduced topics such as searching for contextual meanings of polysemous words using dictionary entries and issues related to conversion and homonymy. The questionnaire also prompted them to consider incorporating artificial intelligence and various applications into foreign language instruction.

Notably, after interviews, some teachers emphasised that they had not fully realised what was meant by dictionary skills before; they had not thought about the importance of teaching polysemy, homonymy and conversion before, but agreed that dictionary use should be introduced into the national curriculum after the interview.

The interviews revealed that answers to the question - “What does teaching or developing dictionary use skills involve”? - are often superficial and tend to equate teaching dictionary use with merely reading an introduction of a dictionary. In reality, the process is far more complex, multifaceted, and layered. I believe that reviving the culture of dictionary use in schools must begin with a clear understanding of this complexity.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The questionnaire was completed by 38 public school teachers in Tbilisi, including both Georgian and foreign language educators, all of whom possessed substantial pedagogical experience.

Analysis of the responses indicated that the majority of teachers predominantly used online dictionaries, which they considered the most effective resource. This finding aligns with research conducted in Hungary, which demonstrated that online dictionaries facilitate efficient access to word meanings and other linguistic information, thereby enhancing convenience for users (Márkus et al., 2023).

Regarding the frequency of dictionary use, results suggested that both foreign and Georgian language teachers employed dictionaries relatively infrequently. English dictionaries exhibited the highest usage rates, likely reflecting the significant representation of English language teachers among survey participants. Among these, Oxford and Cambridge dictionaries were the most frequently used. Comparable trends were observed in the Hungarian study, where these dictionaries received the highest mean scores of 3.62 and 3.64, respectively, with standard deviations of 1.40 and 1.44 (Márkus et al., 2023).

Further findings revealed that the integration of dictionaries into classroom instruction was limited. Many teachers appeared to lack sufficient knowledge of dictionary-use skills or had not prioritised this aspect of pedagogy. This observation is consistent with research conducted in Hungary and other countries, which reports minimal formal training in dictionary use within school curricula (Gouws, 2022; Márkus & Szöllösy, 2006; Margalitadze & Márkus, 2024; Nied, 2022). Moreover, many teachers still did not employ dictionaries in foreign language classes due to the absence of methodological guidance or instructional materials. Questions also arise regarding teachers’ competence in designing exercises and materials aimed at cultivating dictionary-use skills among learners (Margalitadze & Meladze, 2023; Nied, 2022).

As noted by Margalitadze and Márkus (2024), The lack of available textbooks and teaching aids is tangible in this area. Studies reveal that in Hungary and Georgia ‘dictionary awareness’ is generally rather low and that more attention to the teaching of dictionary skills would be needed in the curricula for English language learning. The major challenges that result from a weak dictionary culture, as well as teachers’ inability to incorporate dictionary pedagogy into regular teaching activities in primary and secondary schools, are readily obvious (p. 763).

Many respondents emphasised that having dedicated textbooks accompanied by methodological instructions and exercises would facilitate the integration of dictionary use into lesson plans. Interviews with several teachers reinforced the importance of incorporating dictionary-use skills into the national curriculum and highlighted the need for professional development opportunities, such as lectures and training programmes, to enhance teachers’ understanding of lexicography and their ability to teach dictionary use effectively.

The findings underscore the need for continued research involving teachers in regional areas and the development of specialised training programmes focused on modern lexicography, the pedagogical significance of dictionary use in foreign language teaching, and the consequences of diminishing dictionary culture.

Future studies should extend beyond the capital city to capture a more representative sample and consider the limitations inherent in questionnaire-based research. While surveys remain a common tool, self-reported data may not fully reflect actual practices (George & Pandey, 2017; Kosem et al., 2018). Consequently, complementary methods such as direct observation, think-aloud protocols, video recordings, and interviews are recommended to obtain more reliable insights into dictionary-use strategies (Müller-Spitzer et al., 2012). Additionally, advances in technology allow for innovative approaches, including monitoring user behaviour on digital platforms, eye-tracking analysis, and examination of interactions on Q&A forums and social media, which can illuminate the practical challenges faced by dictionary users.

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DOI: 10.55804/jtsu2346-8149.2025.09.10

Etymological Analysis of Six Mazandarani Toponymical Suffixes

Abstract

Toponyms are among the most conservative elements of language, often preserving lexical, syntactic, and morphological features across centuries. Due to its relative geographic isolation from the Iranian plateau, Mazandarani—a northwestern Iranian language spoken in Mazandaran province—has retained lexical items traceable to Old Iranian, including archaisms absent in other Iranian languages. Mazandaran, historically known as Tabarestan, is a southern Caspian littoral region whose well-protected terrain, shielded by the Alborz Mountains, has safeguarded its linguistic heritage from invasions and external influence. Consequently, Mazandarani, or Tabari, preserves a rich inventory of Middle and Old Iranian vocabulary, including Avestan and Middle Iranian lexical items, as well as borrowings (Borjian, 2021). Spoken by approximately 2.5 million people, Mazandarani is also the only Iranian language with recorded written literature dating to the medieval period, including works such as *Nikināme*, *Marzbānnāme*, *Bāvandnāme*, and various Koranic exegeses, some of which have been later translated into Persian or lost (Borjian, 2021; Najafzadeh, 1989).

This study investigates the etymology and semantic development of six Mazandarani toponymic suffixes. From a dataset of 1,184 rural Mazandarani toponyms, 43 suffixes were extracted, of which six were selected for detailed analysis due to their semantic ambiguity. The results indicate that all six suffixes ultimately derive from Proto-Indo-European, via Proto-Indo-Iranian and Iranian stages, exhibiting parallels with other Indo-European language families, including Germanic and Balto-Slavic. Phonetic forms and semantic content, however, underwent transformations through processes of grammaticalization and semantic change, including decategorization, desemanticization, erosion, and metonymical generalization (Hopper & Traugott, 1993; Heine, 1993; Trask, 2003; Geeraerts, 2010). For example, the common noun *marz* (“border”) experienced decategorization, losing its nominal function and becoming a functional suffix; through desemanticization and metonymic processes (synecdoche), its meaning broadened from “border” to a general sense of “land.”

The findings corroborate Tame’s (2020) conclusion that many toponymic suffixes originate as ordinary lexical items that acquire specialized toponymic functions through semantic change. Suffixes such as *kelā* (“village”), *marz* (“border/field”), *male* (“village”), and *keti* (“hill”) illustrate this trajectory. Comparable suffixes appear in other Indo-European languages, particularly Germanic and Balto-Slavic groups, reflecting shared etymological roots and inherited tendencies in word formation. The recurrence of related phonetic forms with consistent semantic functions further suggests the impact of successive waves of Indo-Iranian settlement in Mazandaran, the retention of Indo-European archaic forms, and the subsequent influence of Persian as a regional lingua franca. Overall, this research highlights the significance of regional dialects in reconstructing lost etymologies, preserving linguistic archaisms, and understanding the mechanisms of toponymization.

Keywords: toponyms, Mazandarani, Indo-European languages, etymological analysis, grammaticalisation, semantic change