

DOES SUCCESS COME BEFORE WORK IN THE ELECTRONIC DICTIONARY TOO?

A Quick Look at the Different Models

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Disclaimer: This article represents the opinion of the writer, and does not reflect any recommendation by ETAI.

“Teacher, what’s the best electronic device to buy?” asked one of my students. It was the end of May 2017, the news had just come out about the use of electronic dictionaries for all Israeli students, and already I was being grilled about the topic. I promised to look into the matter and get back to them at the beginning of the year.

Until the beginning of the 2017-2018 school year, only students with learning accommodations were allowed to use the electronic devices instead of regular print dictionaries. Therefore, teachers for the most part do not teach how to use these devices, let alone learn to use them on their own. But this may all change now.

Of course, this was a hot topic of discussion among English teachers across the country, as evidenced by conversations at the ETAI Summer Conference and in the teachers’ lounge. Furthermore, some Israeli teachers have gone to the internet to further hash out and shine light on this subject, including Naomi Epstein on her Visualizing Ideas blog and Jennifer Byk on the ETNI list.*

While taking into consideration the points that Naomi and Jennifer raised about the use of electronic dictionaries in the classroom, I wanted to look specifically at the differences between the models that the Ministry of Education has approved. I was able to get my hands on three of the four models: the Wizcom Tech Quicktionary, the Oxford XF-7, and the Babylon 1 with Texton. (The Babylon 2 Texton differs only in its casing/design, according to the Ministry of Education’s *Guidelines for Using Electronic Dictionaries* handbook.) **

My aim was to try to use the three different dictionaries as a student would, i.e. answering an unseen and doing coursebook material. It was my first time using an electronic dictionary, so in some cases it required reading the user manuals and/or watching instructional videos. I have summarized my findings below.

The Wizcom Tech Quicktionary

Considered the most expensive, luxury model, its primary advantage lies in removing the need to type in the text altogether! All one needs to do is scan over the word, and the translation appears instantaneously! But scanning the text has a learning curve in terms of the correct angle to hold the pen. Luckily, it comes with a helper attachment to assist in this aspect. In my experimentation, I encountered some words that took a few tries to scan (for example, words in all caps.) It can be frustrating to scan over and over, but there is a way to overcome this: the device gives you the option to type in the word using a stylus pen.

The Quicktionary recognizes plural and possessive nouns and directs you to the singular noun and its meanings. It also recognizes superlatives and shows the base word (for instance, biggest → big,) as well as verbs in the -ed and -ing forms (e.g., blowing → blow.) Another advantage is the ability to hear the words being pronounced (either using the built-in speaker or plugging in headphones). But it does have the smallest display screen, making reading and stylus input somewhat challenging.

Oxford XF-7

The Oxford model is the electronic dictionary that most people are familiar with. I found it the most user-friendly; it took just a few tries to get acquainted and comfortable using it. In the inside of the cover, there is a useful chart of parts of speech, in both Hebrew and English. It has a big screen which makes reading the output easy, with separate options for cross-referencing specific entries, going back to the main menu, and providing expressions which use the word, if applicable. This provides a cleaner look for each entry, requiring extra steps for additional information instead of cramming it all in one screen. It also provides a list of last-searched words which can be a lifesaver if you forget to write the translation down in time!

While it is the easiest to use, it can feel a little bulky and outdated in terms of technology and the entries. The buttons seem to get a bit stuck or require some extra force. Also, newer words or slang in the English language are missing (e.g., *meme*, *Powerpoint*, *dis*.) Lastly, it requires more user knowledge than the other devices. For instance, it does not always recognize conjugated words. If one enters the third person present simple verb *flies*, it only shows two entries for *fly* as a noun (the insect and the zipper on your pants.)

Babylon 1 with Texton

This dictionary definitely provides some bang for its buck. It is similar to the Oxford in price and layout, but it includes an advantageous feature - spellcheck! If a word is entered and not found because it was incorrectly entered, the device provides a list of words that it thinks you were looking for. This could definitely be helpful for those with spelling problems and sloppy typists alike! Like the Oxford, it also has the cross feature. Yet it feels a little smarter than the Oxford, as it recognizes modified words - even if it can take some scrolling between entries to find the correct one.

However, it took me a little longer to feel comfortable with this model in terms of its usability and display. Deleting letters is also a longer process, to the point where I preferred to clear the whole entry and start over. Moreover, the physical design of the model had some downsides: the screen is a little smaller than the Oxford, it lacks the comfortable slant of the Oxford, and I found the blue font on green background a little harsh on the eyes.

One Electronic Dictionary for All?

In order to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of the three models, I have compiled a PMI chart (Pluses, Minuses and Implications).

Model	Pluses	Minuses	Implications
Wizcom Tech Quicktionary	Fast input, reads words aloud, shows entries for modified words and expressions, updated entries	Scanning correctly requires practice, small screen for touchscreen typing, price	Could this be a good solution for non-readers?
Oxford XF-7	User-friendly, big screen, cross function, list of last words, price	Dictionary itself not up to date, requires more English knowledge	Could this be a good choice for higher level students?
Babylon 1 with Texton	Spellchecker, cross function, price	Readability, less user-friendly	Does the use of spellchecker belittle the importance of correct spelling?

It seems to me that there is no one dictionary that will please all students, and successful use of the devices also depends on practice, practice, practice! Therefore it's important for all teachers to get to know the models (as much as we can) and see them in action in the classroom.

**Thank you to Naomi Epstein and Jennifer Byk on their useful input.*

***Thank you to Wizcom Technologies for loaning me the electronic dictionaries.*

****I welcome responses and input from our fellow readers regarding their experience with the different models!*

References

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