

Dictionary, lexicon, glossary, wordbook or thesaurus?
The usefulness of OALDCE7 and OLT for choosing the right word

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Monolingual English learners' dictionaries (MLDs) published in recent years have many features which make them better suited to the needs of the target user group. Among others, onomasiology has slipped into their design. Today, MLDs typically list synonyms and antonyms, or even offer synonym notes, where words close in meaning are compared and contrasted. On the other hand, thesauri have also changed. The year 2008 witnessed the publication of the Oxford Learner's Thesaurus: A Dictionary of Synonyms, which goes beyond clustering words close in meaning. It defines each synonym, exemplifies its usage, and even juxtaposes selected synonyms in special notes.

The aim of the present study is to investigate the usefulness of the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (7th edition, OALDCE7) and the Oxford Learner's Thesaurus (OLT) for discriminating between synonyms. The paper is underpinned by empirical research, in which 73 advanced learners of English took part. In the experiment, words appropriate for given contexts had to be indicated in different synonym sets. The results reveal that neither dictionary significantly shortened the time needed to complete the task. Nonetheless, the use of OLT much more often resulted in successful synonym selection. Interestingly, synonym notes, present in both dictionaries, did not affect the subjects' choices. Besides, different information was usually referred to in the two dictionaries. In OALDCE7 the subjects paid attention most often to definitions, while in OLT – to examples. The results of the supplementary questionnaire suggest that the students' familiarity with the two dictionary types could not have affected their performance. They were nonetheless more satisfied with their results when they had OLT at their disposal rather than OALDCE7. Yet, they were critical of the arrangement of synonyms in the OLT synonym clusters, where the alphabetical order, rather than frequency, would be a better solution.

1. Introduction

The words *lexicon*, *glossary*, *wordbook* and *thesaurus* in the title of the paper are the synonyms of *dictionary* in *The Oxford Thesaurus* (1997). Their juxtaposition illustrates the problem many learners of English face: choosing the right word from a set of approximate synonyms. The awareness of the nuances of meaning which distinguish such synonyms, necessary to make sure that the message conveyed is the intended one, becomes increasingly important with proficiency development. Students need synonyms also for other purposes, e.g., to improve their writing, prepare for an interview or cope with paraphrases in an exam (Lea 2008: 545).

Most learners' dictionaries try to cater for such needs. In OALDCE7, for example, there are around 200 notes on selected synonyms located at specific lexical entries.¹ Yet, such treatment of synonyms is not systematic and cannot be expected to satisfy growing expectations of dictionary users in this respect, who need a consistent and 'principled comparison between words and expressions that have more or less the same meaning, a discussion of their differences and clear information about their use in context' (Bogaards 2009: 316). No wonder, then, that the *Oxford Learners' Thesaurus. A Dictionary of Synonyms* (2008, henceforth OLT) is considered 'more than welcome' (Bogaards 2009: 315).²

¹ Zgusta (1989: 3) calls paragraphs devoted to related lexical units in alphabetically organized learners' dictionaries 'onomasiological pockets'. Such 'hybridity of format' (McArthur 1998: 164) is becoming more and more common. However, it is feared that packing mixed details into a dictionary may result in information overload for the potential user (Hartmann 2005: 197).

² Few learners' dictionaries were designed to group lexical items on the basis of their meaning. Until 2008, the *Longman Language Activator* (2002 [1993]) had been the most recent monolingual source of this type (Coffey 2009: 288). In fact, although the early tradition of English dictionaries was topical (Hartmann 2005: 202),

The main body of OLT consists of over 2000 synonym sets, or entries, arranged alphabetically by the most frequent item, the headword. The synonyms in each cluster are put in descending order of frequency. The real meat of OLT entries is the information about each individual synonym: a definition, examples, collocations and usage information. Any differences that could not be satisfactorily explained by these means are described in tinted notes, where a few synonyms are compared and contrasted. To make it easier for dictionary users to find words which are not headwords, there is an alphabetical index of all the synonyms at the back of the book (Lea 2008: 546-547).³

The starting point for each synonym entry in OLT was the lexical entry in OALDCE7 (Lea 2008: 547). In particular, in both dictionaries, definitions are the same, and examples agree to a large extent; truncated examples from OALDCE7 have been turned into full sentences (Bogaards 2009: 316). Nonetheless, Lea (2008: 545) claims that ‘even 200 notes cannot cover all the synonyms that learners might wish to use: for this they will do better to consult the 2,000 entries of the learner’s thesaurus’.⁴ It seems, however, that the usefulness of OLT, especially in comparison with OALDCE7, should be verified in practice.

2. The aim

The aim of the present paper is to compare the usefulness of OALDCE7 and OLT for discriminating between synonyms. The study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Does the time needed to choose the right synonym on the basis of dictionary consultation differ between OALDCE7 and OLT?
2. Does success in synonym selection depend on the type of dictionary?
3. Do additional notes help to discriminate between synonyms?
4. Does the type of dictionary affect the choice of information in the microstructure?

3. Method

3.1. Materials

To achieve the aims of the study, a pretest, a test and a questionnaire were used. The pretest and the test consisted of the same 14 sentences. In each sentence, one word was extracted and four synonyms were added. Subjects had to decide which of the five words was appropriate in a given context. Only one answer was correct in each sentence. In 5 sentences the synonyms were nouns, in 5 – verbs and in 4 – adjectives. The task was adapted from the thesaurus trainer and the study section in OLT. The aim of the pretest was to eliminate from further analysis any cases where the proper word could be chosen without recourse to a dictionary. In the test, the subjects had to perform the same task with the help of a dictionary.

pedagogical lexicography had long been set in ‘alphabetic concrete’, which was broken only in 1981 with the publication of the *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (McArthur 1998: 163). Yet, even recently there have been calls in the literature on the topic for thesaurus-type dictionaries for learners of English which would provide clear information on semantic differences between near synonyms, also with the help of illuminating example sentences, as well as accessible information on subtle differences in register or style (Chon 2009: 50).

³ In practice, working through a conceptual schema to get to a specific term proves to be demanding, if not impossible at all, hence the need for alphabetical indexes and A-Z thesauri (Hill 1985: 117, Hüllen 2008a: 44-45, 2008b: 110-111).

⁴ Interestingly, Coffey (2009: 288) sees the 200 synonym notes in OALDCE7 as OLT in embryonic form.

The students were randomly assigned to work with either OALDCE7 or OLT. They were given separate booklets with relevant entries from one of the dictionaries. Besides, in the OLT-based booklet, 7 entries, which covered the synonyms from 7 sentences in the test, contained also boxed, tinted notes, where a few synonyms from the entries were compared and contrasted. The same synonyms were explained in special notes in the booklet compiled on the basis of OALDCE7. The notes in the booklets were drawn from OLT and OALDCE7, respectively. No such notes were supplied for any synonyms given for the other 7 sentences. At the end of the OLT booklet, there was also an alphabetical index of all the synonyms present there.⁵

The test took up one page, and there was a six-point questionnaire overleaf. Answers to the first three points were to reveal whether the subjects used monolingual learners' dictionaries of English (MLDs), English thesauri and dictionaries of English synonyms, and if yes – which one(s).⁶ In question 4 the subjects were asked whether they were satisfied with their performance in the test. Four options were given: *yes*, *rather yes*, *rather not*, *no*. In points 5 and 6, open questions were asked – the subjects were to write what they liked most and did not like at all, respectively, about the dictionary they were using in the experiment.

3.2. Subjects and procedures

73 first-year students of English at Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan, Poland, took part in the experiment. 38 of them consulted OALDCE7 and the other 35 – OLT. The subjects were native speakers of Polish and advanced learners of English.

The experiment took place in May 2009. The subjects were given the pretest, which they were to complete in 10 minutes. Once the pretest had been collected, the test and the dictionaries were distributed. A subject dealt with one test and one dictionary. In the test, like in the pretest, the subjects selected one of the five synonyms supplied for each sentence. They also underlined in the dictionary the information which they found helpful. In addition, they put down the time when they got down to doing the test and noted the time again once they had finished the tasks. No changes to their answers could be introduced afterwards.⁷ Then, the subjects responded to the questionnaire. They were allotted 40 minutes to deal with the test and the questionnaire.

4. Test results

The data discussed in what follows refer to correct synonym choices on the basis of dictionary consultation. All the cases where the right words were chosen but no information was underlined in the dictionary, or where the answers were correct already in the pretest, were eliminated from analysis.

⁵ For the sake of simplicity, the booklets are referred to in what follows as OALDCE7 and OLT, or dictionaries in general.

⁶ It is difficult to distinguish between thesauri and dictionaries of synonyms; 'a book of a particular type can be called a dictionary of synonyms by one publisher while for another it is a thesaurus, and for a third one the two lie comfortably side by side, as in the *Oxford Thesaurus: An A-Z Dictionary of Synonyms*' (McArthur 1998: 161). That is why both terms were used in the questionnaire.

⁷ The subjects could see the exact time, that is hours, minutes and seconds, on a large digital clock brought to class by the researcher and put in a place where it was visible to all students. The same clock was used in the whole experiment.

4.1. Question 1

On average, the subjects using OLT spent 17 minutes 26 seconds performing the tasks (Standard Deviation=4.13), while those who consulted OALDCE7 needed 16 minutes 41 seconds (Standard Deviation=4.66). Even though, in general, the OLT users needed 45 seconds more to complete the tasks, in the light of the t-test, the difference between the means is not statistically significant ($p=0.4707$). Relevant information is presented in Figure 1, in which the central point indicates the means, the boxes – the means plus/minus the standard deviations and the whiskers – the means plus/minus the product of 1.96 and the standard deviations.⁸

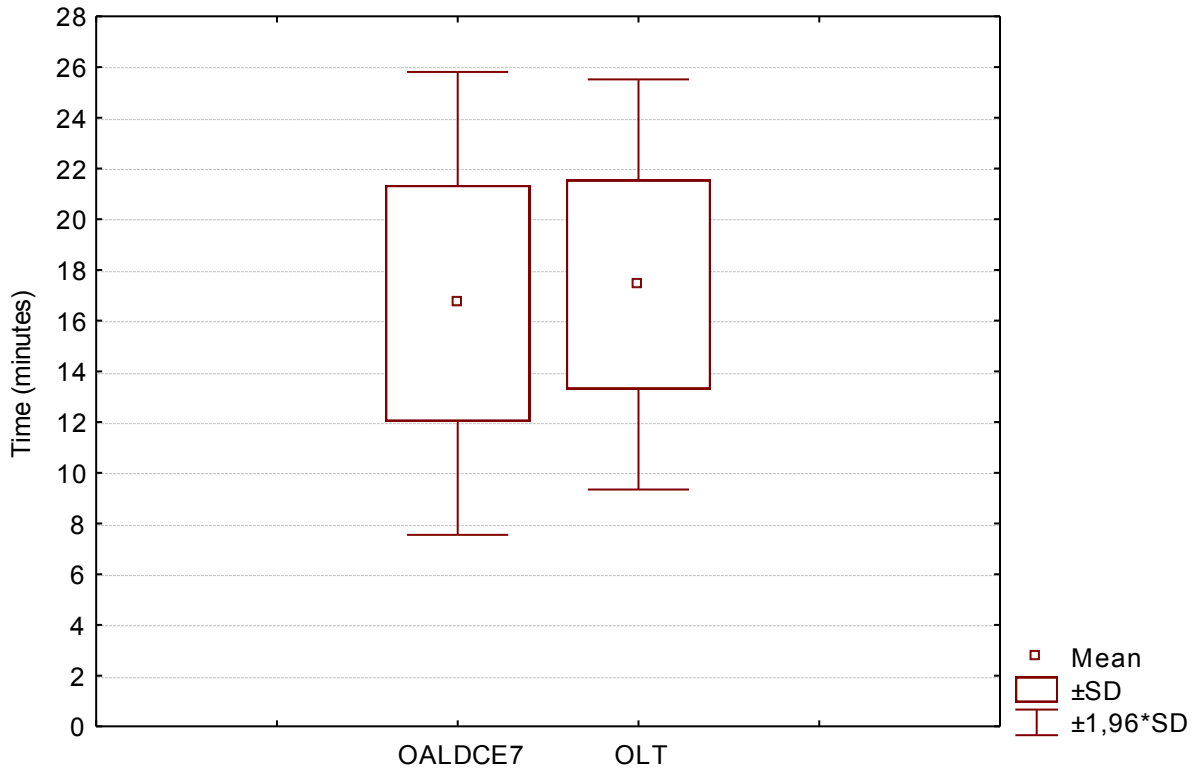


Figure 1. Time spent on the tasks with the help of OALDCE7 and OLT: Means and Standard Deviations (SD)

The standard deviations (SD, visualized by the boxes) suggest that the amount of time spent on the task by the group using OLT was slightly less varied than in the case of the group consulting OALDCE7. Yet, the difference between the variances for the two groups is not statistically significant (F-test, $p=0.4782$).

4.2. Question 2

The subjects were more successful in choosing proper synonyms when using OLT than OALDCE7, and, in the light of the Z test, the difference is statistically significant (OALDCE7: 90.23%, OLT: 94.90%, $Z_{observed} = -2.827$, $p=0.0047$, two-tailed; $|Z_{critical}|=1.960$).⁹

⁸ The whiskers imply then that, provided the data follow the normal distribution, 95% of the data should fall within their range.

⁹ The Z test serves to compare two independent percentages. When the alternative hypothesis is two-tailed, that is when a difference between the compared proportions is expected but its direction is not predicted, the critical value of the test statistic ($Z_{critical}$) can be either positive or negative. The computed value of the test statistic ($Z_{observed}$) necessary to rule out the zero hypothesis of no difference between the percentages can be either positive or negative, but it must be larger than the critical one (Hatch and Farhady 1982: 87-88).

4.3. Question 3

The subjects' results by entries with and without the additional notes on synonyms in OALDCE7 and OLT along with the limits of 95-percent confidence intervals are given in Table 1. The proportions are shown in Figure 2.

| | OALDCE7 | | | OLT | | |
|----------|-------------|-------|-------------|-------------|-------|-------------|
| | lower limit | % | upper limit | lower limit | % | upper limit |
| notes | 85.21 | 89.47 | 92.62 | 91.13 | 94.69 | 96.87 |
| no notes | 86.93 | 90.98 | 93.90 | 91.64 | 95.10 | 97.18 |

Table 1. Proportions of correct answers by entries with and without synonym notes in OALDCE7 and OLT

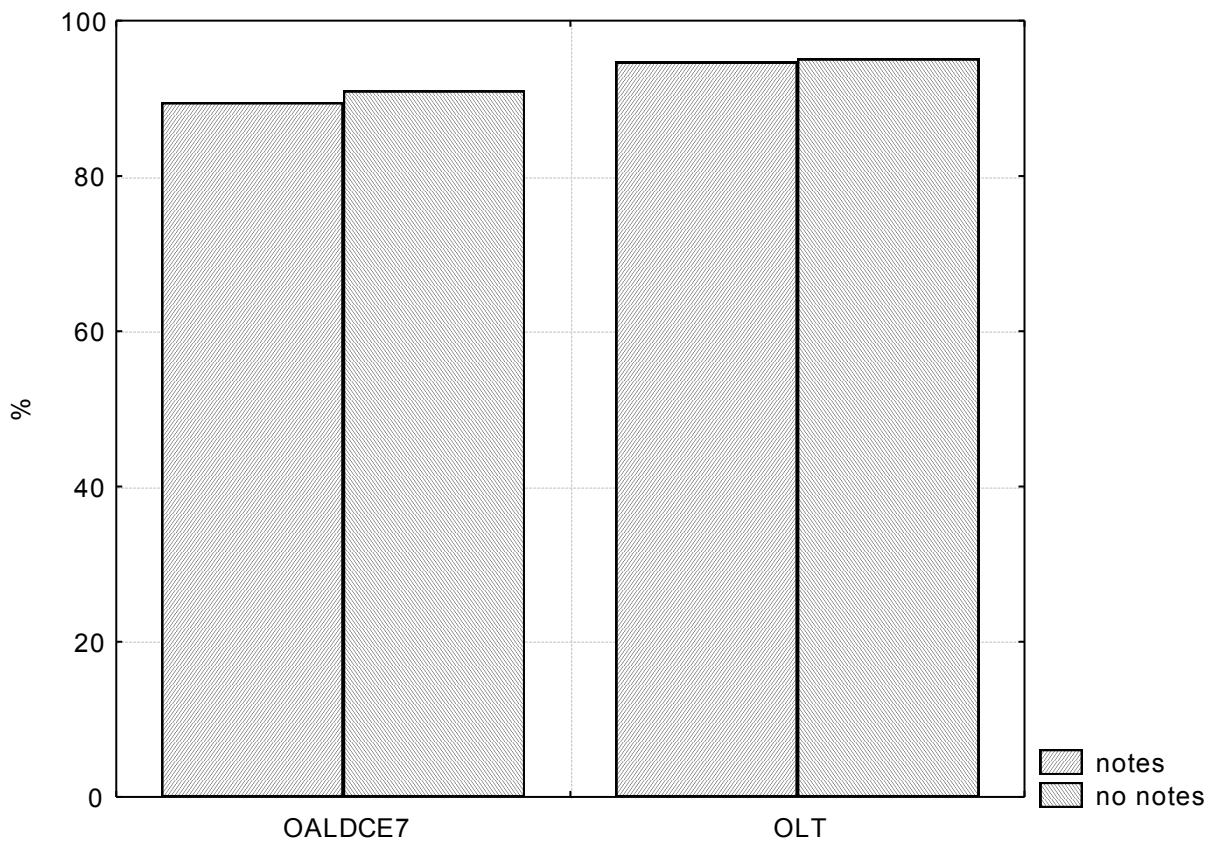


Figure 2. Proportions of correct answers by entries with and without synonym notes in OALDCE7 and OLT

As can be seen, in each dictionary, correct synonyms were chosen comparably often when entries with and without the notes were consulted. The largely overlapping confidence intervals suggest that the notes in either a conventional pedagogical dictionary or a thesaurus do not significantly ease the task of synonym selection. Interestingly enough, the frequency of reference to the notes was comparable in OALDCE7 and in OLT (OALDCE7: 39.10%, OLT: 31.84%, $Z_{\text{observed}} = 1.712$, $p = 0.0869$, two-tailed; $|Z_{\text{critical}}| = 1.960$).¹⁰

¹⁰ The notes were hardly ever indicated as the only source of useful information; some components of the corresponding entries were typically underlined as well. Besides, whole notes were usually circled, not their parts.

4.4. Question 4

In lexical entries in OALDCE7 and OLT, only definitions and examples were considered helpful. Relevant information is displayed in Figure 3.

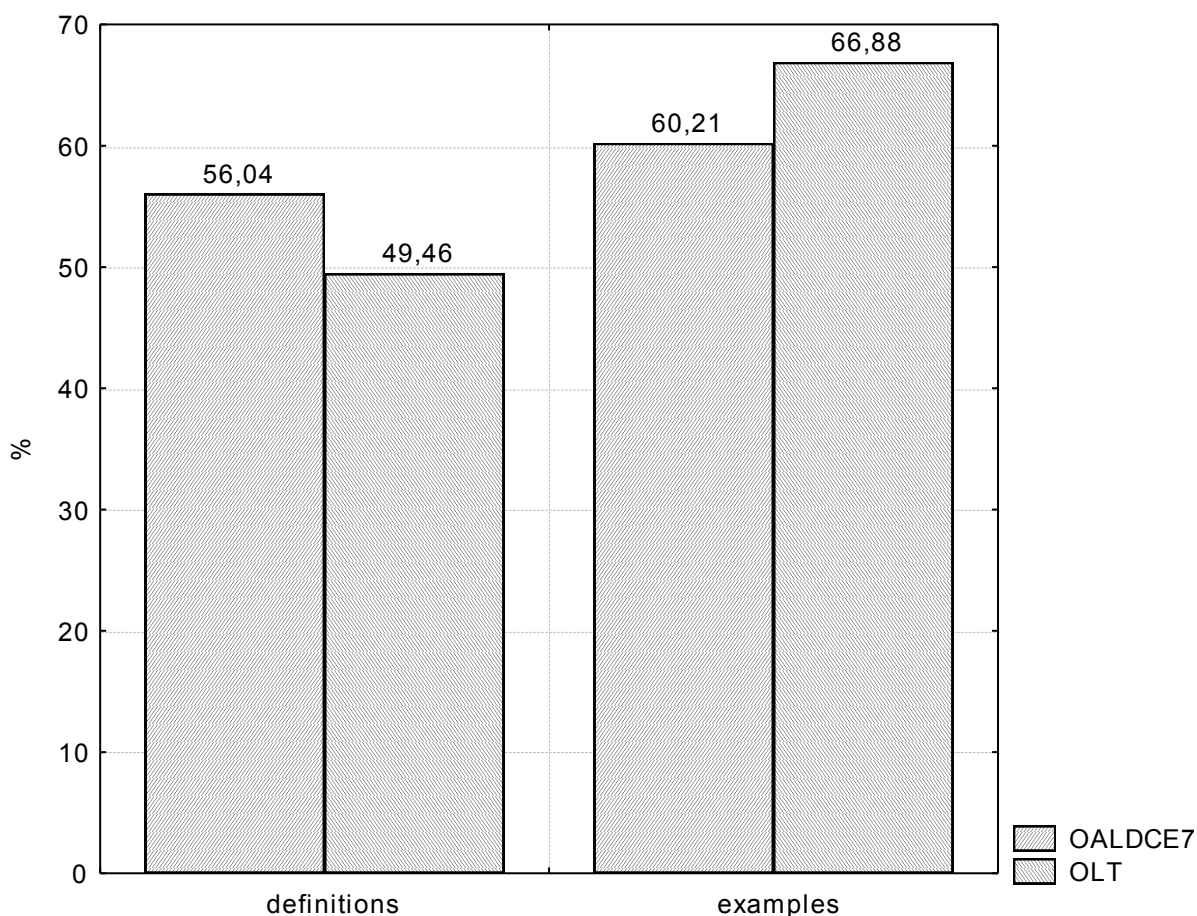


Figure 3. Reference to definitions and examples in lexical entries in OALDCE7 and OLT

It turns out that definitions were drawn on more often in OALDCE7 (56.04%) than in OLT (49.46%), while examples were consulted more frequently in OLT (66.88%) than in OALDCE7 (60.21%). For each source of information, the difference between the two dictionaries is statistically significant (definitions: $Z_{\text{observed}}=2.025$, $p=0.0429$; examples: $Z_{\text{observed}}=-2.130$, $p=0.0332$; two-tailed, $|Z_{\text{critical}}|=1.960$).¹¹

4.5. Conclusions

Overall, in approximately the same time needed to complete the task, learners achieved better results in synonym selection when using OLT than OALDCE7. It turns out that synonym notes, consulted comparably often in both dictionaries, did not facilitate the choice of synonyms. However, different information from lexical entries proved to be useful in OALDCE7 and OLT; definitions were relied on more often in the former, while examples – in the latter.

¹¹ The sources are analyzed in isolation, that is irrespective of whether they both were marked in an entry or only one of them.

5. Questionnaire results

The information obtained from the first three points of the questionnaire suggests that more dictionary users were familiar with MLDs (87.67%) than thesauri (45.21%) or dictionaries of synonyms (42.47%). Importantly, as shown in Table 2, the subjects' familiarity with the dictionary types was comparable in the groups dealing with OALDCE7 and OLT (two-tailed; $|Z_{\text{critical}}|=1.960$). Thus, it could not have been a factor affecting any differences in the results of the two groups in the experiment.

| Familiar with: | OALDCE7 | OLT | Z_{observed} | p |
|----------------|---------|--------|-----------------------|--------|
| MLDs | 89.47% | 85.71% | 0.488 | 0.6255 |
| thesauri | 52.63% | 37.14% | 1.328 | 0.1842 |
| synonym d. | 50.00% | 34.29% | 1.357 | 0.1748 |

Table 2. The subjects' familiarity with MLDs, thesauri and dictionaries of synonyms

It should also be noted that none of the subjects mentioned OLT as the dictionary they knew, and the proportion of those who were used to consulting OALDCE7 was comparable in both groups (OALDCE7: 21.05%, OLT: 14.29%, $Z_{\text{observed}}=0.755$, $p=0.4502$, two-tailed; $|Z_{\text{critical}}|=1.960$).

The subjects' evaluation of their success in the experiment is summarized in Table 3 and illustrated graphically in Figure 4.

| OALDCE7 | yes | rather yes | rather not | no | OLT | yes | rather yes | rather not | no |
|---------------------------|--------|---------------|---------------|------|---------------------------|--------|---------------|---------------|------|
| weights | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 | weights | 5 | 4 | 3 | 2 |
| % | 26.32 | 55.26 | 15.79 | 2.63 | % | 25.71 | 68.57 | 2.86 | 2.86 |
| cumulative % | 81.58 | | 15.79 | 2.63 | cumulative % | 94.29 | | 2.86 | 2.86 |
| | 97.37 | | | 2.63 | | 97.14 | | | 2.86 |
| | 100.00 | | | | | 100.00 | | | |
| satisfaction indicator | 4.053 | | | | satisfaction indicator | 4.171 | | | |

Table 3. The subjects' perception of success in the test – point 4 of the questionnaire

The satisfaction indicators suggest that the students working with OLT were more pleased with their performance than those who consulted OALDCE7.¹² Also, the cumulative percentage of the positive answers (*yes*, *rather yes*) is larger for OLT (94.29%) than OALDCE7 (81.58%).

¹² To compute the index of success, the percentages for *yes*, *rather yes*, *rather not* and *no* were weighed by the pertinent numerical value from 5 to 2 and expressed in absolute terms, e.g., $(26.32 \times 5 + 55.26 \times 4 + 15.79 \times 3 + 2.63 \times 2) / 100$ for OALCE7.

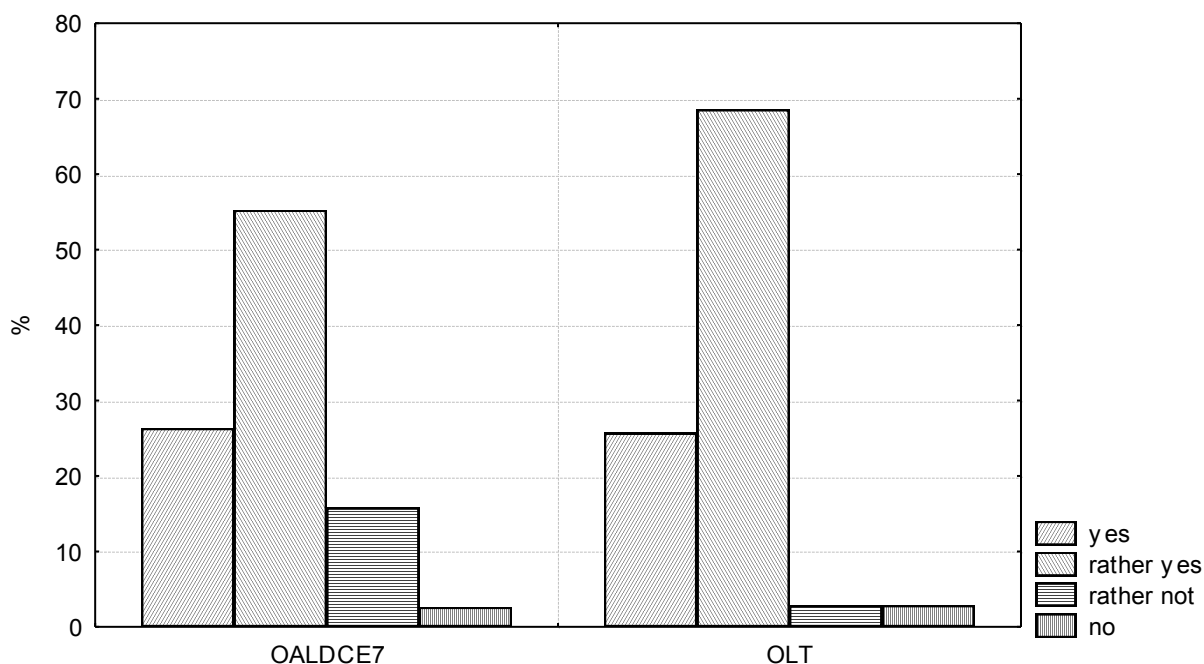


Figure 4. The subjects' perception of success in the test – point 4 of the questionnaire

Points 5 and 6 reveal which design features of OALDCE7 and OLT were considered the most and the least helpful. No options to select from were offered. Table 4 presents the results.¹³

| OALDCE7 | | | | OLT | | | |
|-----------------|-------|------------------------|-------|-------------------|-------|---|-------|
| pluses | % | minuses | % | pluses | % | minuses | % |
| examples | 60.53 | small font | 10.53 | examples | 48.57 | non-alphabetical arrangement of words under the main headword (in synonym groups) | 11.43 |
| notes | 47.37 | the need to turn pages | 7.89 | notes | 37.14 | long entries | 2.86 |
| cross-reference | 10.53 | long entries | 2.63 | semantic clusters | 22.86 | | |
| | | too many examples | 2.63 | explanation | 2.86 | | |

Table 4. Strengths and weaknesses of OALDCE7 and OLT

As can be seen, in both dictionaries, the subjects appreciated examples the most. They also considered synonym notes quite useful. Grouping synonyms in OLT entries was another important advantage of the dictionary. However, the non-alphabetical arrangement of words in synonym clusters was often considered a drawback. In OALDCE7, in turn, the cross-references which facilitated access to semantically related words were seen as useful, although only about half as often as the semantic groups in OLT. Unfortunately, the need to turn pages and browse through the dictionary to get to synonyms put OALDCE7 at a disadvantage.

¹³ The percentages do not add up to 100 in any column because some students listed a few (dis)advantages of the dictionary they were using. However, each point thus raised is treated individually, irrespective of whether it was mentioned alone or not.

6. Discussion

The findings concerning the time spent on the test as well as success in synonym selection should be seen against the information obtained from the questionnaire (points 1-3) that the subjects were more familiar with MLDs than thesauri or dictionaries of synonyms. The fact that the consultation of OALDCE7, which represents the genre the subjects knew better, did not require either less time or resulted in successful synonym choices more often than reference to OLT proves the significant usefulness of OLT, the genre the students did not know (so well). Likewise, the quite surprising finding, in view of the layout of dictionary entries, that the consultation of OLT did not take less time, should probably be put down to fact that this dictionary (type) was something of a novelty to many users. However, its organization was appreciated by the students, although arranging the synonyms in an entry alphabetically, rather than by their frequency, might make it even more user-oriented. Surprisingly, it turns out that synonym notes were not a real help to dictionary users, even though the subjects claimed otherwise.

Unfortunately, the study is not free of limitations. As entries extracted from actual dictionaries were used, factors which were not controlled could have affected the obtained results. While the task involving reference to actual dictionary entries was more realistic, it would be clearer what features of the dictionaries were responsible for the observed differences if a greater degree of control had been adopted and the structure of the entries had been systematically manipulated. Although the questionnaire might be helpful in this respect, the information obtained from a survey does not have to reflect reality.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the entries employed in the study were adequate to meet its purpose, which was to find out which title yields better performance, rather than assess the usefulness of specific design features. Besides, the task itself might be modified to exclude the multiple choice component and encourage dictionary users to find a synonym which could substitute a given word in a specific context. It remains to be hoped that these suggestions will stimulate more research into the area. For now, the present study proves empirically that OLT is a valuable contribution to the collection of dictionaries for foreign learners of English currently on offer.

¹⁴ The findings concerning the role of synonym notes are a case in point.

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