Languages for Specific
Purposes – from Theory
to Practice

DOES THE DICTIONARY REMAIN USEFUL?

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Abstract

The use of dictionaries in the teaching of English as a foreign language was not considered as an indispensable tool in the learning process for many years. The emphasis was laid on different strategies pursuing the acquisition of meaning.

It is our sincere opinion that it is highly important to promote their use, both in and out of the classroom, and from a very early stage. The benefits of dictionaries over other techniques for learning vocabulary could be summarized in two basic points; they provide autonomy to the student to continue learning outside the classroom and they give the student complete information about the world.

Therefore, teachers, have to dedicate special attention to the presentation of good dictionaries, and also their proper use in the classroom.

Keywords: *linguistics, dictionaries, grammar, vocabulary learning, semantics.*
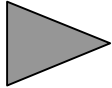
Introduction

For many years, the use of dictionaries in the teaching of English as a foreign language has been a somewhat neglected area, practitioners putting emphasis on other strategies leading to the acquisition of meaning.

When a teacher of English needs to provide students with the meaning of a new word, s/he uses techniques such as mimicry, blackboard drawings, definitions, showing pictures, giving synonyms or antonyms, context guessing, and so on. All these have become very popular because they encourage students to make an effort to develop their understanding in a very active way: they listen to explanations in the target language, they practice the language by giving different guesses, and they revise vocabulary already learnt and so on.

On the contrary, there has been a continuous rejection of the use of translation into the mother tongue and the use of the dictionary.

In our opinion, both prove to be very useful if properly employed. In this paper, we will not aim to deal with the advantages and disadvantages of the translation of words in the classroom, although our personal opinion is that it should not be ruled out, as it can be a profitable technique, especially with adult learners.

Regarding dictionaries, I think it is essential to "promote" their use, both in and out of the classroom, and from a very early stage. The benefits of dictionaries over other techniques for learning vocabulary are manifold, among which we can mention:

- They prepare the student to have autonomy to continue learning outside the classroom.
- They give the student complete information about the word.
- They provide the student with examples of the "use" of the word in context.

For the above mentioned reasons, among others, it is a teacher's duty to give special attention in their lessons to the presentation of good dictionaries, to advise on how to use them properly, and how to integrate them in classroom activities.
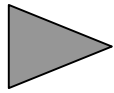
What learning a word means

Learning a word does not only mean knowing the equivalent term in the native language, but this process implies something much more complex.

Richards (1976) brings the acquisition of a new word down to the following assumptions:

- Knowing a word means knowing the degree of probability of encountering it and the sorts of words most likely to be found associated with it.
- Knowing a word means knowing its limitations of use according to function and situation (temporal, geographical, social, field, mode, etc.)
- Knowing a word means knowing its syntactic behavior (e.g. transitivity patterns)
- Knowing a word means knowing its underlying forms and derivations.
- Knowing a word means knowing its place in a network of associations with other words in the language.
- Knowing a word means knowing its semantic value (its composition)
- Knowing a word means knowing its different meanings (polysemy)
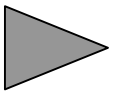
What constitutes a good dictionary

Bilingual dictionaries have had a bad press for a long time due to the criticism of translation as an approach to or facet of language learning and due to the fact that they sometimes tend to be inadequate and unreliable. However, it must be said that, in the very early stages of learning, even an inadequate bilingual dictionary can provide important support and be a quick way of finding information.

As proficiency develops, greater use should be made of monolingual dictionaries. In fact, Baxter (1980) concludes that prolonged dependency on a bilingual dictionary retards the development of language proficiency.

Whatever kind of dictionary we refer to, a good one should fulfill as many of the following conditions as possible; it should:

- contain good information about the symbols and abbreviations used in it.
- list the different definitions of a term in order of meaning from the most common or simple to the most rare or complicated.
- use simple, clear language in the definitions, avoiding unfamiliar words that make the student refer to a different entry.
- give grammatical information about the word (part of speech, countable or uncountable, transitive or intransitive, followed by infinitive or –ing)
- provide information about stylistic appropriacy of the term (whether is formal, informal, colloquial, slang, literary, pejorative, etc.)
- give example sentences containing the word, if possible based on actual usage.
- provide the student with the phonetic transcription and stress marking.
- suggest some of the most common collocations.
- contain illustrations.
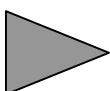
Recommended general dictionaries for students of EFL

We are going to concentrate here on monolingual general dictionaries that are valid for students of any nationality, as nowadays there are more and more dictionaries that deal with specific matters or tackle very limited areas, such as dictionaries of idioms, phrasal verbs, colloquial terms, combinatory dictionaries, pictorial dictionaries, antonyms and synonyms, thesauri, and so on.

Among the most renowned monolingual general dictionaries, we can highlight:

- Longman Active Study Dictionary (1991)
- Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary (1987)
- Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (Latest edition 1987)
- Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English (1989)

Their most characteristic features are as follows:

1) *Longman Active Study*
   - It is aimed at intermediate, pre-First Certificate students.
   - It includes 45,000 references.
   - It contains 250 usage notes based on real evidence of students' writing.
   - There is a workbook included in the dictionary.
   - It shows alternative spellings and American spellings. E.g. Judgement (also judgment)
   - It provides interesting related words to some of the entries. E.g. Atheist (compare AGNOSTIC)
   - Words that intermediate students may not understand in the definition are written in capital letters, so that they can look these up easily. E.g. Cockle: a small SHELLFISH
   - It shows which verbs have to be or can be followed by "that". E.g. Claim (+that)
   - It shows how a word can be divided at the end of a line using a hyphen. E.g. Civ-i-li-za-tion
   - It contains full-page color illustrations accompanied by exercises.

2) *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary*
   - It includes 70,000 references.
   - It is aimed at a wide range of students, from basic to quite advanced.
   - It is based on the way contemporary English is used in all kinds of communication, and many uses of word-forms that have been found to be very uncommon, obsolete, dialectal or highly technical have been left out. E.g. the word "cyclamate" cannot be found in this dictionary.
   - The entry word is always explained by means of a complete, simple, easily understood sentence in natural English.
   - The examples are written in italics and are never made up, long, complex or unnatural, but they are typical of usage and have been selected from actual instances.
   - It contains an extra column to the right of the entries, providing the more advanced student with structural information, thus keeping the main dictionary text simple and accessible.
   - It pays special attention to collocations and typical phrasing.

- A lot of emphasis is put on very common words, those often called "purely grammatical" or "empty" words, such as *the, and, of.*

3) *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*
   - It is aimed at advanced learners.
   - It includes 56,000 references.
   - It contains 400 detailed usage notes, some of them including information on pragmatics that is giving clues to the way words are used or what speakers may mean. E.g. By the way: Although this expression seems to suggest that you are going to add unimportant information, in fact it is often used to introduce a subject that is really very important to you.
     By the way, I wonder if we could discuss my salary some time.
   - Very complete grammar information is provided.
   - It suggests American equivalents for British entries. E.g. drawing pin BrE // thumbtack / AmE.
   - Compound words and different parts of speech are shown as separate entries, which makes it easier and quicker to find them.
   - It includes cross-references – notes that direct the student from one headword to another that has some connection with the word they are looking up. E.g. Import – compare EXPORT
   - It shows the most common or fixed collocations in bold print.
   - Definitions are written in simple language, using a small "defining vocabulary" of about 2,000 common words. This list of words is shown at the back of the dictionary. If the definition includes a word which is not on the list, it is written in capital letters and has a short explanation of its meaning in brackets. E.g. white wedding: a wedding at which the BRIDE (= woman being married) wears a long white dress.
   - Labels show the region / area / country where a word is particularly used.

4) *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English*
   - It is aimed at advanced students.
   - It includes 57,000 entries.
   - It contains 200 usage notes.

- It shows different words used with the same meaning as the one we are looking up. E.g. Lime (also *quicklime)*
- It gives very good information about which preposition to use after a headword.
- It shows when to double consonants before comparative/superlative forms or –ed/-ing forms.
- It marks very clearly the beginning of a different section under the same entry, by using symbols:
  - start of the idioms section (idm)
  - start of the phrasal verb section (phr v)
  - start of the derivative section (◊)
  - start of the compound section(□)
- It contains illustrations showing typical features of Britain, such as: trees common in Britain; flowers common in Britain; birds common in Britain; some typical British homes.
- Worksheets to help students learn to use the dictionary are available.

One of the problems teachers may encounter in encouraging their students to use the excellent reference resources now available is that learners may not be very experienced in using dictionaries or might be daunted by the complexities of the larger dictionaries. The most popular learners' dictionaries try to get round the problem by providing workbooks to accompany the dictionaries. Some of these are:

- Co build's Learning Real English Workbook (Fox and Kirby 1987)
- The Longman Dictionary Skills Handbook (McAlpin 1988)
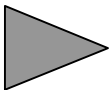
How to teach students to make the most of dictionaries

Handling a dictionary is a skill that must be taught very carefully, and all teachers should spend a reasonable amount of time talking to their students and schooling them in the correct use of the dictionary, as they will take great benefit from this all their life.

► *Before opening; a dictionary,* the students should follow these steps:
  a) Think carefully about the sentence in which the new word appears. Can you try to guess its meaning from context?

b) Look carefully at the new word. What kind of word is it?

This procedure will help the students in two ways:

a) After having thought about the possible meaning of the word and the part of speech it could be, the student will now feel better able to choose from among all the possible meanings provided by the dictionary.

When the student thinks carefully about the whole sentence before looking in his dictionary, he might find that he does not really need to look up the unknown word. Virginia French Allen illustrates this with the following example sentence:

"One of the rewards that space travelers receive is the beautiful view of the planet on which we live".

A student who has been taught to think about the whole sentence will say to himself, "I know that **rewards** is a noun here because it is used after **the**. The sentence tells me a reward is something that is **received**; and it must be something good, because the beautiful view is called a reward".

b) The student will be more prepared to look for the basic form of the word, which might coincide with the actual word they are looking up.

For example, if the student is looking up the word "equipped" that they found in the sentence:

"Weather stations are equipped to receive direct reports from U.S. weather satellites", they will probably not be able to find it. But those who have looked carefully at the sentence will have guessed that "equipped" is the –ed form of a verb and that the verb probably ends in a single "p". Now the student is ready to look for "equip" and to find out whether the verb means something like "establish", "permit" or "require" – or something different from any of these.

► Some students will even need guidance as to *how to reach the page* in the dictionary, where the required definition appears.

In order to practice this, we can ask students to do the following exercises:
- Give the number of the page where each of the following words are defined: fog – loaf – load – roly-poly.
- Arrange the following words in alphabetical order: slump – sluggish – shadow – sloppy – slope – spate.
- One student opens the dictionary and reads aloud the first word on the left-hand page and the last word on the right-hand page. The other students try to think of words, which will appear on either of those two pages.

► Some not very advanced students might have problems *recognizing what the basic word is,* especially when looking up idioms, phrasal verbs or fixed expressions.

We could train them, by giving them a set of words or expressions whose meaning they do not know, and asking them to identify the exact word they would look up. For example: tapping – echoes – begged – out of breath – with flying colors.

► Once the students have found the word in the dictionary, they might find it very difficult to *decide on the best entry* for their context.

To develop this skill, we can ask students to do the following exercise:

We can provide them with a series of sentences containing unknown terms that have quite a range of different meanings, and ask them to find the most suitable one in each case. For example:

I think my phone has been *tapped.*

He has issued *a flat* denial of these allegations.

Could you ask Peter to *book* some seats for the concert?

Each of the words in italics in these sentences has different meanings and can act as different parts of speech. It is useful for students to know which of the words

they have learned may also function as a different part of speech. To learn a new function for a word one already knows is to expand one's vocabulary in an efficient way.

► It is also essential to teach students the most common <u>abbreviations</u> found in dictionaries. Although each dictionary could use different ones, there is usually some sort of agreement on symbols and abbreviations that stand for common words, and we should make sure our students are familiar with them.

We should pay particular attention to the following:

adj. – adjective / adv. – adverb / Amer. – Americanism / C – countable / conj. – conjunction / f. – feminine / FAM. – familiar, colloquial / fmal – formal / infmal – informal /
intr. – intransitive / m. – masculine / n. – noun / o.s. – oneself / pl. – plural / poss. – possessive / p.p. – past participle / pref. – prefix / prep. – preposition / pron. – pronoun / rel. – relative / s.o. – someone / sth. – something / tr. – transitive / U – uncountable / U.S. – United States / v. – verb

► Most good dictionaries use *International Phonetic Alphabet* (IPA) Symbols. The learner who cannot read these is at a complete loss, and the ability to interpret IPA symbols may have to be taught directly and practiced in class if efficient dictionary use is to be fostered. Students are usually quite reluctant to do so, because they think it is too difficult and tiresome, but it is our experience that even absolute beginners get used to it very quickly and even enjoy it if presented in an attractive way. We do not think they should become experts in transcription, but it is most important for them to be able to pronounce a word they have never heard accurately by reading the symbols.

In order to make this task appealing, we could, for example, use a "bingo" game, in which each student is given a card with a few phonetic symbols that have been taught, and the teacher calls out different words containing the sounds represented by the symbols. When the student hears the word for which he has got the symbol, he crosses it out. This should be played separately for vowel, diphthong and consonant symbols. When we are dealing with vowels or diphthongs, we should use one-syllable words that contain only one vowel or diphthong. If we are

working with consonants, we will need the students to concentrate only on the first sound of the word we read out.

► We should also encourage students to look at all the *example sentences* the dictionary provides. This is, in my opinion, essential to help students understand the meaning of the word more clearly and remember it more successfully.

► It is also important to get the more proficient students to look at possible *prefixes and suffixes* that can accompany the word they are handling, and note them down, as this will enlarge their vocabulary.

We could ask students to use their dictionaries to look up all the possible affixes that can accompany a given word, for example: man (manly, unmanly, unmanliness, manlike, mankind…)

► Another important point, especially for advanced students, is to make them aware of the possible *collocations* that affect the word in question. When two items occur together frequently, they are said to collocate. Collocation errors are extremely frequent at all levels. Items may co-occur simply because the combination reflects a common real world state of affairs. The better the dictionary is, the more variety of collocations it will provide the student with.

An interesting exercise dealing with this aspect is that of providing the students with a "collocation grid", which they will have to fill, using good dictionaries. Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman propose the following example:

Beautiful   woman / child / dog / bird / flower / weather / landscape / view / day / village / house / furniture / bed / picture / dress / present / voice

Lovely   woman / child / *dog* / flower / weather / view / day / village / house / furniture / *bed* / picture / dress / present / voice

Pretty   woman / child / bird / flower / view / village / house / bed / picture / dress

Charming   woman / man / child / village / house / voice

Attractive   woman / man / village / house / dress / voice / proposal

Good-looking woman / man / child / dog /

Handsome   woman / man / present

► Most students take *notes* after consulting a dictionary, as this helps them to memorize the word and it is quite useful when they want to revise. This might sound a very personal question, but it is of great value to the student to obtain some sort of guidance or advice from the teacher on the possible ways of organizing written vocabulary information, so that the learners can choose the most appropriate one for them. Traditionally, most learners were encouraged to list their vocabulary items as they were learnt in chronological order, and the most common way of indicating the meaning was to assign a mother-tongue equivalent to each item. But this system of storage is not flexible, it does not allow for later additions or refinements as one's knowledge of the item increases. It is better to advise the student to use category sheets or diagrams, which could have headings such as topic areas or situations. The information given for each term could include the definition in English, part of speech and at least one example.

To help students get some practice doing this, the following exercise could be performed: Thirty or forty words that have been recently learnt in the classroom are written on the board and the students are asked to divide them into different categories. Of course, the chronological organization is not incompatible with other forms of storage, so this should not be completely discouraged. Whatever system they adopt, the most helpful guidance teachers can give here is to show learners how to be systematic, as organization is generally held to be the key to memory.
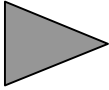
> ### Games / Activities which involve the use of the dictionary

Of course, not only should we instruct students on how to use the dictionary, but also integrate it in the classroom routine, and use it in games and activities that will help students develop a liking for its use. There are a great variety of activities we could propose, depending on the level of the students, among which figure:

- *Daft Definitions (Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby)*

a. Choose an unfamiliar word from the learners' dictionary, copy out the definition given, and then write a sentence exemplifying its meaning and use. Then write two or three false, but plausible, definitions for the same word, again with exemplifying sentences, also false. Read all your definitions and sentences to the class, for the learners to decide which one is correct and which one is false. Once a decision has been reached, or the learners agree to differ, tell them to consult their dictionaries and check for themselves.

- *Word Dip (John Morgan and Mario Rinvolucri)*

b. Ask students to form groups of 2-4 players each. Make sure each group has a dictionary. Player A opens the dictionary at random and he chooses an unknown word and tells the other player(s) what it is. He should pronounce the word and spell it out. The other player(s) then question student A on the meaning of the word. A may answer only "yes" or "no". Student A scores a point if no one guesses the meaning within twenty questions. Otherwise, the first person to guess the meaning gets the point.

- *From Word to Word (John Morgan and Mario Rinvolucri)*

c. Ask students to work individually with one dictionary each. Write up a word on the blackboard: choose one, which will produce a rich set of synonyms. Ask the students to look up the word on the board and to read through the definition. Then ask them to choose one of the words in the definition and to look that up. Ask the students to continue in this way until they have looked up about a dozen words. At

each stage, they should write down the word they look up. Finally, ask the students to link the words in their list into a paragraph or a short story.

Starting from the word *plant* one person produced this list:

plant – vegetable – organism – structure – framework – skeleton – bone – bobbin – reel – cylinder – tubular – chamber

  - *Connections (Andrew Wright, David Betteridge and Michael Buckby*)

This game gives practice in the reading skills of skimming and scanning a text at speed. Each learner needs a dictionary. The learners are given a word, and starting together, they must search through their dictionaries for another word containing the same number of letters. They must be able to argue a connection between the meaning of that word and the starting word.

  - *Building stories (Worksheets – Oxford Student's Dictionary)*

d. Ask students to open their dictionaries at random and to write down any three words, which appear on the two pages that are visible. They then write a short passage or story containing those three words in alphabetical order. One student reads their story to the others who must try to guess which pages had been opened.

  - *Names of Pop Groups (Worksheets – Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*

e. The following are names of current or former pop groups. Ask the students how many of these words they would expect to find in the dictionary. They should tick the words they recognize as being part of the language and then check by looking to see if any of the others are in the dictionary.

Aha – Applejacks – Barracudas – Blancmange – Bros – Dire Straits – Drifters – Eurhythmics – Genesis – Heat wave – Honeycombs – House martins – Hue and Cry – Kinks – Living Daylights – Prefab Sprout – Rolling Stones – Status Quo – Wham – Zombies
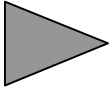
Conclusion

Michael McCarthy wrote in 1990: "It is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the student learns grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of the foreign language are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in a foreign language just cannot happen in any meaningful way." (McCarthy, 1990)
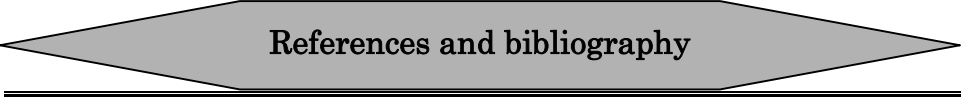
And yet this has been an underestimated aspect of the language for many years.

In recent times there has been a radical shift towards emphasizing the importance of vocabulary acquisition in language teaching. Many books have been written in order to help teachers to decide on what vocabulary to select for their students to learn, how to present it, how to explain it, and what exercises they should use to practice and reinforce it.

However, we should not forget the most valuable, priceless tool a student of a foreign language can have: the dictionary. Its proper, regular, skilled use will provide the students with autonomy, security and much wider information about words than any of the techniques used by their teacher. It is a teacher's duty therefore to instruct the learners on the use of the dictionary, encourage them to consult it, and help them enjoy this process. Should this duty be successfully carried out, it would, in our opinion, constitute one of the most important contributions that a teacher could make to the current and future progress of the learners we have in our charge.

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