

English Learners' Dictionaries: How Much do we Know about their Use?

Abstract

There is dire need for research in the behaviour and habits of users of learners' dictionaries. We know very little about the causes that bring about the use or avoidance of these dictionaries, about the success or failure rates in accessing the information they contain, about their contribution to vocabulary acquisition, etc. Moreover, some of the lexicographic goals in learners' dictionaries seem to be detached from those of modern language learning methodology.

1. Learners' dictionaries defined

Learners' dictionaries are dictionaries designed specifically for learners or users of a language other than their mother tongue. These dictionaries are characterised by:

- a. utilising a limited word list (usually 2000–3500 words) to describe tens of thousands of entries, derivatives and idioms;
- b. providing sentences or phrases illustrating the most common uses, or, alternatively, classroom uses, of a substantial number of these entries; and
- c. providing notes and other information presumed by the lexicographer to be useful to the user.

This is in contradistinction to native language dictionaries, which do not limit the number of words used to explain the entry-words, and whose notes and other information – if included – are more of an informative nature than being linguistically or pedagogically oriented.

It should be noted that, although bilingual dictionaries are not classed as learners' dictionaries by design, they are, in fact, learners' dictionaries by force of practice. Tomaszczyk (1979), in Poland, and Baxter (1980), working in Japan, found that college and university students are much more likely to own and consult bilingual rather than monolingual dictionaries. Atkins and Knowles (1990) found in seven countries that more

language learners use bilingual dictionaries than monolingual learners' dictionaries. These findings have since been confirmed by research in many other parts of the world.

2. The purpose of this paper

The purpose of this paper is to enhance the awareness of lexicographers engaged in the study or profession of pedagogic lexicography – with regard to the gap that exists between prevalent lexicographic theory, on one hand, and the practice of dictionary users and modern language learning methodology, on the other.

3. How much do we know about the use of learners' dictionaries?

Very little. Moreover, very little is being done to find out. Of the many hundreds of people in the world engaged in various aspects of lexicography – through teaching, studying, writing or research – only a very small number are engaged in broadening our understanding of dictionary use in general, and learners' dictionary use in particular. This is evident from the small number of journal articles, conference lectures and academic courses pertaining to dictionary use.

The first major work to approach lexicography from the user's perspective was *Dictionaries and Their Users* (Hartmann, ed. 1979). Two years later, *Lexicography and Its Pedagogic Applications* appeared (Cowie, ed. 1981), in which the dictionary was examined with the language learning user in mind.

A EURALEX seminar devoted to dictionary use brought forth *The Dictionary and the Language Learner* (Cowie, ed. 1987).

Finally, Battenburg (1991) wrote an extensive monograph, *English Monolingual Dictionaries: A User-Oriented Study*. "The dictionary user," he noted, "has commonly been ignored or overlooked in lexicographical research" (p. 8).

Battenburg then went on to describe 11 research projects that were undertaken with a view to better understanding dictionary use. Here, briefly, are some of the conclusions, in table form. (Table 1.)

THE DICTIONARY-MAKING PROCESS

Researcher	Year	Country	Groups studied	Findings
Tomaszczyk	1979	Poland and USA	English teachers and translators	preferred bilingual dictionaries
Baxter	1980	Japan	university students of English	preferred bilingual dictionaries
Bejoint	1981	France	English teachers in training	preferred monolingual; used mainly to find meanings
Bensoussan	1984	Israel	university students	beginners preferred bilingual dictionaries
Kharma	1985	Kuwait	university students	found monolingual dictionaries too difficult
Griffin	1985	USA	ESL students	untrained in dictionary use
Herbst and Stein	1987	Germany	university students and teachers	unable to use monolingual dictionaries effectively
Snell-Hornby	1987	Switzerland	university students	used mainly to find meanings
Iqbal	1987	Pakistan	advanced university ELT learners	untrained in dictionary use
Battenburg	1989	USA	ESL students	dictionary use not effected by native language or culture
Diab	1990	Jordan	student nurses	noted the need for specialised dictionaries

Table 1: Some results of Battenburg's survey of surveys

To this list must be added a more recent research project – that of Laufer and Melamed (1994) among high school students in Israel, in which it was found that the use of a semi-bilingual dictionary for reading comprehension passages was more effective insofar as vocabulary acquisition was concerned, than the use of a monolingual learner's dictionary (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary was used) or a 'good' bilingual dictionary.

All the research projects in Battenburg's review involved university students or adults. This may provide a certain picture of dictionary use in tertiary education, but it relates to only a small percentage of all language learners.

What do we know about the psychology of dictionary use? Not very much. We assume owners of dictionaries use them when they encounter words or phrases they don't understand. But to what extent has this been scientifically investigated? We assume dictionary users will succeed in finding the desired entry, and the meaning they need. What is the success rate of searching? Tono (1984) concluded from his experimental studies that users concentrate mainly on the beginning of entries, ignoring later sub-senses. We assume the user understands the meaning given, but Tono found that too many examples can discourage the user from reading the entire entry. How much research has been carried out on the end result of dictionary use? What proportion of dictionary use is the result of an encounter with an unknown word, and what proportion is because of other reasons? After how much trial-and-error is a correct entry found? How much irrelevant material is read before the appropriate meaning is found, and with how much time and effort? When is an explanation understood (completely, partially, not at all), or misunderstood? These are all questions that require investigation.

Because of the strong competition that exists among dictionary publishers, some of them play a game called, "Who can think of a new feature to include in a new edition?" As a result, learners' dictionaries are getting larger and larger (more so because of the added features than because of the addition of new entries or meanings), due to the publishers' desire to make their products more competitive. But how much of the material found in dictionaries is actually sought by users? Hartmann (1989) questions how much of the information found in learners' dictionaries is essential. Tickoo (1989) states that the form and function of learner's dictionaries must be determined by their audience. It would certainly help lexicographers to know how much of dictionary use is motivated by a passive need to know only the meaning, and how much by the need for other information.

Whose opinions carry more weight with lexicographers and publishers – users' or teachers'? How does what language learners want differ from what their teachers think they should have? These questions are not only lexicographic and psychological; they are also didactic and philosophical.

Accessing the headword is often a time-consuming and annoying process. Many methods are in use, such as charts to facilitate and/or speed up entry-finding, an alphabet guide at the edge of the page, or just running heads at the top of the page showing the first and last headword on each page. Their efficacy should be compared by studying how quickly and easily (or otherwise) headwords may be accessed. The tests might reveal some surprising things about formats.

Not being able to understand an explanation is not half as bad as misunderstanding an explanation. Vocabulary acquisition in dictionary use has been assessed in only a handful of studies. Prominent among these are Bennisoussan (1984) and Laufer (1994), both of the University of Haifa, in Israel, and, to a lesser extent, by Hartmann (1994) at the Dictionary Research Centre in Exeter, UK.

Beyond momentary understanding, the actual learning process, or committing to memory, should also be investigated, as well as the elements of permanent and temporary retention. Some handed-down concepts that are part-and-parcel of most learners' dictionaries deserve to be researched for confirmation, correction or rejection. For example, do foreign language learners read the front matter in dictionaries? How many read the section on how-to-use-this-dictionary? In some dictionaries it is 50 pages long, much of which is not applicable to other dictionaries. Little attempt has ever been made at standardisation. Besides which this material appears in the target language – another obstacle to its use. Ways of solving this problem warrant investigation.

What percentage of learners' dictionary users actually reads the phonetic transcription? In Israel the phonetics were entirely deleted from the school dictionaries, with no visible effects. This was done so as not to subject the students to learning two foreign alphabets (the Latin and the IPA). Besides, it was found that looking at the phonetic transcription is liable to affect spelling. Undoubtedly, high exposure to spoken English in films and pop songs has had a considerable impact on the degree of familiarity of the youth with the sound, the tune and the rhythm of English.

Experienced language teachers have answers to many of the above questions, from their everyday experience. But conclusions drawn impressionistically must be examined scientifically.

4. The need for standardisation

If there were a standard list of dictionary abbreviations and symbols, there would be more motivation for learning them, as the knowledge gained would be applicable to all dictionaries. How does not knowing the up-to-100 abbreviations used in some dictionaries limit or hinder their use?

A standardised approach to looking up idioms might result in greater use of this facility and less giving up in the middle.

Standardisation is vital also in the contents description printed on dictionary covers. The figures often mislead, or are simply incorrect, and the terminology used may be misleading. E.g., the term *references*, as it appears on the covers of millions of learners' dictionaries, does not appear in any of these dictionaries in the sense in which it is used when referring to the number of entries or headwords. (For example, Cobuild gives six separate uses for the noun *reference*, none of which pertains to the sense in which it is used on the back cover ("...over 75,000 references"). Indeed, the self-description on dictionary covers has been found to be unreliable.

5. The gap between pedagogical lexicography and language learning methodology

How well versed are pedagogic lexicographers in the methodology of foreign language teaching, that underlies the very justification for their work?

Since what language learners want might not be consistent with what language syllabuses prescribe, learners should have dictionaries that combine the pedagogic features that they should be exposed to, with whatever user-friendly features it is possible to give them.

But most school syllabuses do not concern themselves with language learning dictionaries. Nor are dictionaries prescribed in most schools. When dictionary use is neither prescribed nor described in hardly any language syllabus throughout the world, when only a handful of Ministries or Departments or Boards of Education publish a list of approved dictionaries, and when language methodologists do not agree on a universal methodology for teaching foreign languages, how can lexicographers (and publishers) know what to do?

By this I do not suggest removing all responsibility from lexicographers. Despite the almost total absence of concern for dictionaries by authorities at the governmental level, it should be clear to lexi-

cographers that they are not catering to most of the learners' needs. Most foreign language learners throughout the world are not at the level of the Big Four (Oxford Advanced, Longman Contemporary, HarperCollins Cobuild and Cambridge International). Yet, most attention is given to these advanced level dictionaries. Clearly, more beginners' and intermediate level dictionaries are needed.

Moreover, in most countries of the world, language learning incorporates some degree of use of the mother tongue. When left to the local publishing system this usually finds expression in simple bilingual (non-pedagogical) dictionaries. Bilingual dictionaries can only encourage use of the Indirect or Translation Method in foreign language teaching, which is obviously not the aim of these education systems. This results in most education systems inadvertently promoting dictionaries which the systems themselves should condone.

When left to the publishing companies that export their dictionaries to the non-English speaking world, the dictionaries involved are monolingual English learners' dictionaries. Since most school systems include the use of some degree of the local language, these monolingual dictionaries are not compatible with the students' requirements. They are imposed upon the students for want of more appropriate dictionaries.

6. An alternative to monolingual and bilingual dictionaries

One alternative to both the local bilingual dictionaries referred to above and the imported monolingual learners' dictionaries, is fully bilingualised versions of some of the monolingual learners' dictionaries, which are usually translated and printed locally under licence. But, being fully bilingualised, users (who normally do what comes easiest, not what is apt to be more beneficial for them), will usually suffice with reading only the translated text, and completely ignore the English text.

7. A further alternative

Another alternative – one which induces users more to read the English text – is monolingual learners' dictionaries that are only partially bilingualised. We will not know what the optimum amount of translation is that should be contained in learners' dictionaries, until much more research is done on this subject. In the meantime, a type which is rapidly

gaining popularity throughout the world, and one which has already been adopted by the school systems in a number of countries, is the type called semi-bilingual, in which only the entry-word is translated.

But in both fully bilingualised and semi-bilingualised dictionaries studies are required on the extent to which users actually read the English text (explanations, examples or additional information) when the mother-tongue equivalent appears alongside it.

8. Some concluding thoughts

Some (Marouseau, 1951) have called lexicography a science. Others (Johnson, 1747) called it an art. Gove (1967) said it is an art because lexicography requires "subjective analysis, arbitrary decisions and intuitive reasoning". If it is an art, it cannot be detached from its audience: there is the creator and there is the receiver. Let us give more consideration to the potential receivers of this artistic creation.

Dictionaries cited by name

Cambridge International Dictionary of English, CUP 1995.
Collins Cobuild English Dictionary, HarperCollins, 1995.
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Longman, 1995.
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 5th ed., OUP 1995.

Other references

- Atkins, B.T. and F.E. Knowles 1990. "Interim Report on the EURALEX/AILA research report into dictionary use." *BudaLEX '88, Proceedings from the 3rd EURALEX Congress*, ed. by T. Magay and J. Zigany. Akademia Kiado, Budapest, pp. 381–392.
- Battenburg, J.D. 1989. *A Study of English Monolingual Learners' Dictionaries and Their Users*. Ph.D. Dissertation. Perdue University.
- Battenburg, J.D. 1991. *English Monolingual Learners' Dictionaries: A User-Oriented Study*, Lexicographica, Series Maior 39, Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- Baxter, J. 1980. "The Dictionary and Language Behaviour: a Single Word or a Handful?" in: *TESOL Quarterly*, Volume 14, Number 3, pp 325–336.

- Bejoint, H. 1981. "The Foreign Student's Use of English Monolingual Dictionaries: a Study of Language Needs and Reference Skills" in: *Lexicography and Its Pedagogic Applications*, OUP, pp. 207–222.
- Bensoussan, M., D. Sim and R. Weiss 1984. "The Effect of Dictionary Usage on EFL Test Performance Compared with Student and Teacher Attitudes and Expectations" in: *Reading in a Foreign Language*, Volume 2, Number 2, pp. 262–276.
- Cowie, A.P. 1981. "Lexicography and its Pedagogic Applications" in: *Thematic Issues of Applied Linguistics*, Volume 2, pp. 201–203, OUP.
- Cowie, A.P. 1987. "The Dictionary and the Language Learner", *Papers from the EURALEX Seminar at the University of Leeds, 1–3 April 1985*. *Lexicographica*, Series Maior 17, Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- Diab, T. 1990. "Pedagogical Lexicography: a Case Study of Arab Nurses as Dictionary Users" in: *Lexicographica*, Series Maior 31, Niemeyer, Tübingen.
- Gove, P.B. 1967. "Introduction: The Dictionary's Function" in: *The Role of the Dictionary*, Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, pp. 5–7.
- Griffin, P.J. 1985. *Dictionaries in the ESL Classroom*, M.A. Dissertation, Southern Illinois University.
- Hartmann, R.R.K. ed., 1979. *Dictionaries and their Users: Proceedings of the 1978 BAAL Seminar on Lexicography*, (Exeter Linguistic Series 4) ITL, Review of Applied Linguistics, University of Exeter, pp. 44–45.
- Hartmann, R.R.K. 1989. "What we (don't) know about the English language learner as a dictionary user" in: *Learners' Dictionaries: State of the Art*, SEAMEO, Singapore, p. 20.
- Herbst, T., and G. Stein 1987. "Dictionary-Using Skills: a Plea for a New Orientation in Language Teaching" in: *The Dictionary and the Language Learner*, *Lexicographica*, Series Maior 17, Niemeyer, Tübingen, pp. 115–127.
- Iqbal, Z. 1987. *Aspects of the Learner's Dictionary with Special Reference to Advanced Pakistani Learners of English*, Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Aston at Birmingham.
- Johnson, S. 1747. *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language*, Scolar, Menston, England.
- Kharma, N.N. 1985. "Wanted: a Brand New Type of Learner's Dictionary" in: *Multilingua*, Volume 4, pp. 85–90.
- Laufer, B. and L. Melamed 1994. "Monolingual, Bilingual and 'Bilingualized' Dictionaries: Which Are More Effective, for What and for Whom?" in: *EURALEX '94 Proceedings*, pp. 565–576.
- Marouzeau, J. 1951. *Lexique de la terminologie linguistique française, allemande, anglaise, italienne*, 3e ed. Geuthner, Paris.

- Snell-Hornby, M. 1987. "Towards a Learner's Bilingual Dictionary" in: *The Dictionary and the Language Learner*, Lexicographica, Series Maior 17, pp. 159-170.
- Tickoo, M.L. 1989. *Learners' Dictionaries: State of the Art*, SEAMEO, Singapore.
- Tomaszczyk, J. 1979. "Dictionaries, Users and Uses" in: *Glottodidactica*, Volume 12, Poznan, pp. 103-120.
- Tono, Y. 1984. *On the Dictionary User's Reference Skills*, Dissertation, Gakugei University, Tokyo.