Véronique DOPPAGNE, Department of English Language and Linguistics, University of Liège

Moving EFL Students to a Regular Use of the Learner's Dictionary: Carrot or Stick Approach?

Abstract

Learner's dictionaries of English have been a blossoming branch of lexicography for some time now. They are regularly revised and completed, a new one has recently appeared, and they are a never-ending source of critical inspiration for the specialists, most of whom regard them as essential tools for EFL students.

And yet, it can be observed that learner's dictionaries are complete strangers to EFL students in the French-speaking part of Belgium. The question is therefore: what can we do to move them to use one?

The aim of this paper is to suggest an answer to that question by presenting the guidelines of an experiment I intend to carry out with our second-year students.

Keywords: learner's dictionaries, EFL students, learner's autonomy

1. Introduction

Learner's dictionaries of English have been a blossoming branch of lexicography for some time now. They are regularly revised and completed (the latest editions of the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary*, the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, and the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* were published in 1995), a new one has recently appeared (the *Cambridge International Dictionary of English*, 1995), and they are a never-ending source of critical inspiration for the specialists, most of whom regard them as essential tools for EFL students.

And yet, in the French-speaking part of Belgium, we are facing a paradoxical situation: the target users do not use them. The best argument supporting this statement is perhaps the fact that they are so difficult to find: if most bookshops do not sell learner's dictionaries, it is probably because learner's dictionaries, for various reasons, don't sell.

I will not inquire into those reasons in this paper, they would deserve a whole paper for themselves. But the most important one is undoubtedly ignorance. Most EFL students have never heard of those dictionaries; and if, by chance, they have, this does not mean that they are convinced of their usefulness.

My point in this paper is twofold:

(1) formal introductory courses to and training in the use of learner's dictionaries would be a good way of making the students awake to their usefulness.

(2) it is our responsibility, here at the university, to try the experiment: being in charge of the future English teachers' training, we are in the best position to give the initial impulse that, if the experiment proved conclusive, could result in an increasingly widespread use of learner's dictionaries and, eventually, in the introduction of some sort of training in dictionary use into the secondary school curriculum.

Starting from these working hypotheses, I decided a few months ago to try the experiment with our second-year students. The next step to take was to opt for a proper approach to the problem.

2. The stick approach

In class, I asked the students to write an essay without resorting to any dictionary. After a close analysis of those text productions, it turned out that more than 70 % of their mistakes could have been avoided if they had only used a learner's dictionary properly.

I was thus tempted to introduce the students to learner's dictionaries from that avoid-making-mistakes perspective. I wanted to present them with a list of their most frequent mistakes divided up into categories (semantic mistakes, syntactic mistakes, spelling mistakes, ...) and show them in what way a learner's dictionary like *COBUILD* could provide them with the information needed.

But I soon discarded that possibility for two main reasons:

(1) such an approach is relatively negative and reduces the learner's dictionary to an anti-mistake tool.

(2) as such, it is not only negative but also dangerous: if French-speaking Belgian EFL students don't use learner's dictionaries, on the other hand they rely very much on bilingual dictionaries whatever the learning task (reading or text production). Being presented with their own mistakes, they would soon realize that in most cases their bilingual dictionary could provide them with the right information as well, even if it is in a different way.

A typical example of semantic mistake (false friend): 'society' as a translation for the French 'société' meaning 'firm, company'. If the students look up the word 'society' in *COBUILD*, they will find out that the word cannot possibly have the meaning they want to assign it. But if they look up the word 'société' in the French-to-English part of *Le Robert et Collins Senior*, the field label 'comm' standing for 'commerce' will lead them to the right translation.
A typical example of syntactic mistake: forgetting the preposition in 'to provide someone something'. Whether they look up the word 'provide' in *COBUILD*, in the English-to-French part of *Le Robert et Collins Senior*, or the word 'fournir' in the French-to-English part of the same dictionary, they will read the same information, i.e. you have to say 'to provide someone with something'.

The effect of the whole experiment could then be totally opposite to the one expected: the students would be confirmed in their initial behaviour and would go on relying exclusively on their bilingual dictionary and ignoring learner's dictionaries.

3. The carrot approach

My view is that the approach has to be positive to be efficient, rather advertisement-like than sermon-like: the learner's dictionary is not an anti-mistake tool but one more tool for the

students to improve their knowledge of English; it must be presented to them as one more milestone on the way to the learner's autonomy.
As a result, the experiment I intend to carry out with our second-year students next year will be close to a marketing operation.

4. The methodology

The learner's dictionary of reference will be the latest edition of the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (1995), which the students will be required to buy.

In a maximum of ten lessons, I will go through the introduction to that dictionary with the students, providing extra linguistic information or examples each time they ask for them. I will also train them in its use with exercises coming from or inspired by the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary Workbook* (1995). As I said in the introduction, the aim of those lessons is to make the students awake to the usefulness of a learner's dictionary and therefore to create new dictionary habits.

At first, only half of the group will benefit from those lessons[1]: they will be my test group. The other half of the group will act as a control group within the framework of the assessment process that will take place three months after the last lesson, the test-group students needing a certain decanting period in order to digest the information they will just have received and to form new dictionary habits.

The assessment of the experiment will be carried out on the basis of text productions. The whole group of second-year students will be asked to write an essay in class, essay for which they will be allowed to use any dictionary they wish to. On a separate sheet of paper, they will be asked to make a note each time they look up a word in a dictionary: which dictionary, which word, the kind of information they look for (spelling, meaning, grammar, usage,...) and the result of their research. If the experiment has proved conclusive, the rate of consultation of learner's dictionaries should be much higher for the test-group students.

5. Note

[1]   The other half of the group will benefit from the same teaching after the assessment process.

6. References

Atkins, B.T.S. and K. Varantola (1997) « Monitoring Dictionary Use », in *International Journal of Lexicography* 10, 1-45.
Bogaards, P. (1988) « A propos de l'usage du dictionnaire de langue étrangère », in *Cahiers de Lexicologie* 52, 131-152.
Bogaards, P. (1990) « Où cherche-t-on dans le dictionnaire? », in *International Journal of Lexicography* 3, 79-102.
Bogaards, P. (1993) «Models of Dictionary Use », in *Toegepaste Taalwetenschap in Artikelen*, 46/47, 17-28.

Bogaards, P. (1996) « Dictionaries for Learners of English », in *International Journal of Lexicography* 9, 277-320.

Herbst, T. (1996) « On the way to the perfect learners' dictionary: a first comparison of OALD5, LDOCE3, COBUILD2 and CIDE », in *International Journal of Lexicography* 9, 321-357.

Laufer, B. and L. Melamed (1994) « Monolingual, Bilingual and 'Bilingualised' Dictionaries: Which are More Effective, for What and for Whom? », in *EURALEX 1994 Proceedings,* (eds.) W. Martin, W. Meijs, M. Moerland, E. ten Pas, P. van Sterkenburg and P. Vossen, Amsterdam: Vrije Universiteit, 565-576.