

The use of dictionaries as a pedagogical resource in the foreign language classroom

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Abstract

Teachers of English as a Foreign Language are often unfamiliar with the resources offered by dictionaries, and unaware of the support these reference books provide for the development of non-native speakers' communicative competence. Thus, these teachers fail to refer their students to these books in search of the information they need in order to decode and encode the target language. The autonomy gained through the efficient use of dictionaries prepares learners to deal with the language beyond the classroom context. This study examines the number and variety of opportunities for dictionary practice offered by course books, which might motivate lexicographers to play a more active role in the design of course books.

Introduction

I can recall browsing through dictionaries when I was small, but I have no recollection of using or learning how to use dictionaries in school. I must have used dictionaries when I was studying English, though, especially in college. However, when I started teaching English as a foreign language in Brazil, in the early sixties, dictionaries became an indispensable tool in my class preparation. In order to feel comfortable about the meaning and the use of the words in the lesson I was teaching, I would look up every word that was new to me, or which I could not clearly define. I would write definitions and examples down, and practice saying them so that I could give my students the impression that I was familiar with the vocabulary I was teaching them.

In the sixties and seventies, language teaching was teacher centered. Pedagogical coordinators would observe classes to see if the teachers were following the steps they had been trained to, and were able to clarify all of the doubts the students voiced, thus indicating the lesson had been carefully prepared. In other words, the teacher was seen as the source of knowledge, both for clarification and modeling the foreign language. The silence needed by the learners to look up words in dictionaries seemed to indicate that the class was not productive, and that time was being wasted, for the learners should be actively engaged in drills or conversational exchanges. This way, learners were not given the chance to develop the skills that are necessary to become efficient dictionary users, i.e., independent learners who will be able to solve the language difficulties they will encounter in and outside the classroom.

One of the language schools I was working for in the 1980's launched a dictionary-practice booklet, aiming to develop a market for their own dictionary; however, we were not aware of the educational value of working with it in those days, and soon all the copies were sitting on

the shelf in the teachers' room. There was a program we had to follow and a number of lessons in the book we had to teach.

From my experience with teachers I know this is a common attitude. A teacher will often frown when the students confess they do not like handling dictionaries – they do not like it because they don't know how to get the information they need, or they don't know what information the dictionary can give them, apart from the meaning of words. Even getting the right meaning for a particular context is sometimes a problem too. Most of us teachers have learned by ourselves how to use dictionaries, and we expect our students will do the same, although they do not have the same motivation or responsibility as we do.

Two studies

A first attempt to fill this gap in developing efficient dictionary users was a 1997 survey with 38 teachers from public schools and private language schools in two major cities in the State of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. This survey indicated that 78% of the teachers find that looking words up in the dictionary is a pleasurable activity because it enriches their knowledge, while only 15% of them mentioned this facilitates their pedagogical task. Although 94% of these teachers believe it is necessary for language learners to learn how to use dictionaries, only 14% of them organize classroom activities to give their students the opportunity to handle dictionaries. About half of these teachers (55%) feel frustrated when they cannot find the information they are looking for in a dictionary and they think that this is because the title they are using is not as good as they would expect, while 41% of the others understand no dictionary can contain all the information about a language. Finally, 68% of the teachers believe that the dictionary is primarily intended for decoding the foreign language.

These findings led to a second study which aimed to identify and analyze the resources available in EFL books so that the students can learn how to handle dictionaries efficiently, thus becoming independent learners. In order to do that, 3 textbook series were examined – student's books and workbooks: Headway (Oxford University Press, 5 levels = 10 books), Interchange (Cambridge University Press, 4 levels = 8 books) and Atlas (Heinle & Heinle, 4 levels = 8 books).

The study of the course books was divided into (1) finding which activities may be conducive to the use of dictionaries, either for decoding or encoding, and (2) analyzing the kinds of search the learner is to make for the completion of the different tasks.

Findings

Throughout the Headway series, 20 explicit activities for dictionary practice were found, starting in the elementary level with practice of bilingual dictionaries, such as with 4 of the parts of an entry: the headword, the phonetic transcription, the part of speech and the equivalent term in the foreign language (Student's Book, page 10). In other such activities in this series, real dictionary entries are transcribed to be used in the completion of tasks, followed by requesting the students to make comparisons with their own dictionaries. Other activities explicitly direct or simply allow for the students to use their dictionaries. No such explicit activity was found in Interchange, while Atlas – which is concerned with raising the user's learning awareness – presents a note about what a dictionary entry includes together with a small sample of a dictionary entry (Student's Book, level 3, page 47). Actually,

according to the teacher's manual in Atlas, extensive use of dictionaries in class is not recommended.

A tentative classification was made of the activities found throughout the 26 books of the 3 series examined into two broad groups, namely, decoding and encoding. According to Rundell (1999:36) they consist of 'receptive skills'- listening, reading and L2 to L1 translation - and 'productive skills' - speaking, writing and L1 to L2 translation, respectively. Some activities involve more than one skill, such as looking up the meaning of words prior to a listening activity which is followed by writing or speaking; in those cases, the first activity (decoding) was taken into consideration.

We found a total of 574 activities which are conducive to dictionary practice: 313 in the Headway series, 132 in the Atlas series and 129 in the Interchange series (Table 1). Of these, 417 (72.6%) are activities in which dictionaries can be handled for encoding the target language, while 157 (27.4%) are for decoding the language. This is an interesting finding to be discussed with practicing/student teachers, since so many of them are not aware of the fact that dictionaries can be so useful in encoding the target language too. Dividing the number of activities found by the number of books in each series, one can see that Headway averages 31.3 activities per book, Interchange 16.1 and Atlas 16.5 (Table 1).

| | <i>Headway</i> (10)* | <i>Interchange</i> (8) | <i>Atlas</i> (8) | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------|----------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| Decoding | 59 (18.8%) | 35 (27.0%) | 63 (47.6%) | 157 (27.4%) |
| Encoding | 254 (81.2%) | 94 (73.0%) | 69 (52.4%) | 417 (72.6%) |
| | 313 (31.3/bk) | 129 (16.1/bk) | 132 (16.5/bk) | 574 |

*The numbers in parentheses after the titles refer to the number of textbooks+workbooks in each series.

Table 1: Total number of activities conducive to dictionary practice

The most frequent encoding activity (27.8%) consists of providing isolated words to fill in charts or lists, such as in:

| | | |
|-----|-------------|------------------|
| (1) | <i>noun</i> | <i>adjective</i> |
| | color | _____ |
| | _____ | dangerous |

(Headway Elementary Workbook, p.70)

followed closely (26.6%) by searching the meaning prior to oral or written production, such as in (2), where the students are to define if the adjectives have a positive or negative connotation, and then talk about different jobs:

- (2) **Check the words you know. Look up the others in your dictionary.**
tiring / amazing / boring / exhausting / interesting
 ⇒ Working in an elevator is boring; there's little variation.
 It's great to be a teacher: you can learn a lot of interesting things about people.
 (Atlas Student's Book 3, p.9)

Other encoding activities these series contain are related to:

- (i) filling in gaps in sentences (23.3%);
- (ii) pronunciation (10.3%);
- (iii) relating words (7.2%);
- (iv) selecting the best alternative sentences (3.4%);
- (v) crossing the odd one out (1.4%).

The most common decoding activity (34.4%) is related to semantic fields, which is helpful for retention of vocabulary, followed by understanding the meaning of words as a preparation for reading or listening tasks (21.7%). Next, there are tasks for identifying subtleties such as connotation (14.6%), matching terms with their definitions (11.5%), illustrations (10.2%) or synonyms/antonyms (7.6%).

The next step of this study was to analyze the kinds of search these activities involve. The 27 topics found were placed into 8 groups, and the highest incidence occurs with search for meaning (47.2%), which ranges from *selecting the meaning which fits the given context to grouping words into semantic fields* (Table 2).

| | <i>Headway</i> | <i>Interchange</i> | <i>Atlas</i> | <i>Total</i> |
|-----------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Meaning | 97 | 73 | 101 | 271 (47.2%) |
| Collocation | 82 | 20 | 9 | 111 (19.3%) |
| Pronunciation | 45 | 6 | 1 | 52 (9.1%) |
| Affixation | 26 | 10 | 6 | 42 (7.3%) |
| Verbs | 28 | 6 | 3 | 37 (6.5%) |
| Synonyms/Antonyms | 24 | 7 | 4 | 35 (6.1%) |
| Spelling | 17 | - | 1 | 18 (3.1%) |
| Nouns (count/uncount) | 5 | 3 | - | 8 (1.4%) |
| Total | 324 (56.4%) | 125 (21.8%) | 125 (21.8%) | 574 |

Table 2 Total number of activities per kind of search

The second most frequent (19.3%) is collocation which, according to our experience, is the kind of search most English teachers are not aware they can have their students use dictionaries for. Among the collocation searches provided are *verb + noun* (make a mistake X do a favor), and *adverb + adjective* (very good X absolutely perfect), or fixed phrases such as *facts & figures*. Pronunciation activities account for 9.1% of them, which indicates that book writers are reasonably concerned with helping students become less frightened about phonetic symbols.

Results

These findings indicate that course books provide a significant number of options for English language teachers to help their students learn how to find the information they need in dictionaries – and a great deal of it has to do with encoding. According to Béjoint (1984:211), *dictionary skills can only be consolidated through frequent searches for different kinds of information*, which will help learners to:

- (i) understand the conventions in dictionaries;
- (ii) become interested in language and in lexicography;
- (iii) own dictionaries and get used to resorting to them;
- (iv) expand their linguistic proficiency and cultural knowledge.

Thus, scheduling one lesson on how to use dictionaries is not the best way for teachers to develop efficient dictionary users and, accordingly, it is not the best way to develop independent learners. However, in one such lesson, teachers can lead their students through (i) the preface of a dictionary, in order to learn what the dictionary aims to offer to its users and how it is designed, (ii) the amount of information provided by one given entry and the special features found in learner's dictionaries, and (iii) a comparative analysis of different dictionary titles and, especially, of what the dictionary owned by the student offers. Once the learners find out their dictionary is better than they expected, they might be motivated to resort to it more frequently and enthusiastically than they used to; if, however, they find out their dictionaries are not as good, they will be aware of the fact that they can refer to other titles. They should know there are different kinds of dictionaries serving different purposes, like for native X foreign speakers, monolingual X bilingual, picture dictionaries as well as specific ones for pronunciation, slang or technical terms, collocations or verb phrases, and so on.

The lexicographers' job now, as we see it, is to enter the domain of pedagogy by taking over some pages in course books, a space in which the learners can become familiar with the vast range of learning possibilities dictionaries offer. This may be in the way of activities involving all kinds of searches in real entries in the course books themselves, or by requiring the learners to use different kinds of dictionaries.

This practice can center the learning of the foreign language in the learners and in the development of their abilities and autonomy, motivating them to use the language adequately and efficiently. As the pedagogy is different, students may be more committed to learning and rely more on their learning capacity. Not to mention the fact that they may turn out to be frequent dictionary users, i.e., independent learners, throughout their professional careers and personal lives. After all, education aims especially at the learners' life after they leave the classrooms, when they live their *real* lives.

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