
Lexicographical Resources Assisting Vocabulary-building: an Irish-language Experience

Liam Mac Amhlaigh
Maynooth University
e-mail: liam.macamhlaigh@nuim.ie

Abstract

Language-learning adults encounter a dictionary of some form as they develop a familiarity with their chosen language of learning. For children, the process is similar albeit that they may not have ‘chosen’ to learn the language in question in the same manner – their innate geographical location and the choices of their parents and guardians will play very important roles. All learners use dictionaries principally as an aid to build, and re-confirm, vocabulary in a language. Dictionaries facilitate a sense of ownership and enfranchising that has always had a presence in language learning, even though the concept of self-learning, and/or self-help is something that has only been a powerful force from the 20th century onwards. Building on the theoretical overview of learning vocabulary by utilising dictionaries, this paper aims to garner an insight into how dictionaries can currently assist vocabulary-learning in an Irish-language immersion setting.

Keywords: vocabulary-building; dictionaries; Irish language; immersion setting

1 Introduction

‘Dictionaries are indispensable self-learning tools’ (Chan 2011: 1). The research for this paper (to set out to examine that specific assertion in the context of children) was conducted in 2013 and involved an examination of the patterns of usage of Irish-language dictionaries and dictionary/lexicographical material in upper class primary school immersion settings. Very little research has been conducted in the area of dictionary usage in immersion settings and particularly in the learning of L2/L3 languages, in Ireland or overseas. Little is known as regards a) the importance of print material as opposed to electronic material; b) the frequency of usage of dictionaries; c) the choice of dictionary available; and d) the role of the teacher and school in framing the dictionary usage patterns of the children.

This paper is founded on the assumption that successful and regular dictionary use is a vital component of vocabulary building, and consequently, also of the extension of language skills and usage in a first or second language. This researcher gathered informal attitudinal data from classroom teachers and then deployed a survey to elicit the dictionary usage patterns from the users themselves – the children. In most schools in Ireland, the Irish language functions *de facto* as a second language; English being the first language.¹ The immersion setting is vital for this educational context, as the

¹ Crowley regards the fact that nearly all Irish language dictionaries, published since 1600 were produced in bilingual format (with one exception: *Foclóir no Sanasan Nua* [1643]) as being clear evidence of linguistic colonisation. In his opinion, it was through English that the Irish language has received its meaning and its description (2005: 129). This reality is something that is more defined and evident in the 21st century, in an era of globalisation and recognition of English as a global *lingua franca*. That being the case, Irish language dictionaries, and especially the bilingual examples

frequency and involved nature of such language use would mean that one might be expected to also see a greater incident of dictionary usage in such settings. The age-group involved in the study, was that of an upper primary school age of 10-12 year olds, in a fifth or sixth class setting. This paper provides a cursory overview of the study and its main findings.

2 Dictionary Use and Building Vocabulary

Although there is no distinct section in either the English-language or Irish-language school curricula (Primary School Curriculum 1999) or indeed in the teacher guidelines within Ireland that refers to dictionaries and their proper usage in the classroom, Finland's National Core Curriculum (Opetushallitus 2004: 139) advocates dictionary use in foreign language teaching, mentioning dictionary usage specifically, as one of the language learning strategies that should be mastered in primary education. The dictionary is listed as one of the main sources for finding information about the target language, alongside the textbook, and as an efficient language learning tool (Poussi 2010: 6).

There may be several reasons to discourage dictionary use in language classrooms: for instance, it has been seen to be inhibiting learners from developing important skills, such as guessing from context (Poussi 2010: 5). As far as reading fluency is concerned, pupils' excessive consultation of dictionaries may interrupt the flow of their concentration on information and make reading a process of word-by-word decoding, in which the whole meaning is often missed (Summers 1988; Scholfield 1982; Karbalaei & Talebi 2011: 22). In some quarters, language educators claim that using a dictionary while reading can lead to inefficient learning (Bensoussan et al. 1984; Knight 1994). Luppescu and Day's (1993), and indeed Knight's research indicates that when compared to control groups (who were not allowed to use dictionaries) L2 learners using dictionaries took twice as long to complete the reading task in Luppescu and Day's study and half as long in the case of Knight's study. More proficient learners showed little or no gain when using dictionaries in the studies carried out by Bensoussan et al. and Knight, indicating that the extra time used to look up words was time used inefficiently (Pritchard 2008: 218).

Scholfield (1997: 296) suggests that a combination of inferring and dictionary look-up may be optimum, for the long-term retention of vocabulary. Bogaards (1998) found that learners were significantly more likely to identify the correct definition in the dictionary, than they were to accurately guess the meaning of unknown words from context (Pritchard 2008: 218).

Very little advice is given to pupils on how to choose a suitable dictionary. The microstructure of a dictionary may affect users' look-up performance (Al-ajmi 2002) and their preference(s). Different dictionary types - bilingual, bilingualised, monolingual – may also affect learner's choice of dictionary (Chan 2011: 2). Monolingual dictionaries are often viewed as the heart of lexicographical

thereof, have played a great role in developing a written understanding of the Irish language. In relation to Irish-language dictionaries, learners of the language have been given a higher priority over other users in the 20th century. Nevertheless Nic Pháidín (2008: 99) notes that "Lexicography in Irish is a testament to the dedication and achievement of individuals operating in a policy vacuum" and "Dictionaries have been commissioned much too late considering the timescale invariably required to complete them" (2008: 99).

supply in any language. Educators can prefer learners to choose the monolingual dictionaries because they provide total language immersion. The prevalent opinion among educators is that using bilingual dictionaries slows down the acquisition of a second language (Legac & Horvatic 2008: 1). This occurs because bilingual dictionaries hypertrophy a pupil's tendency to translate from their mother tongue into their target language, instead of encouraging the pupil to start thinking in the language they are attempting to master. Bilingual dictionaries can falsely lead pupils to believe that there is a one-to-one correspondence between lexemes in two different languages (Bratanic 2001), when this is not always the case.

On the other hand, learners themselves tend to prefer bilingual dictionaries for fast consultation and feel more comfortable with a mother language translation (Karbalaeei & Talebi 2011: 22). According to the results of representative research, undertaken in 7 different European countries, approximately 75% of the pupils tend to use bilingual dictionaries (Atkins 1998). In many cases, such dictionaries provide a translation rather than a definition. The head-words for the main collection will be extracted from L1, and a frequency analysis will be applied.

As the years progress, it has been observed that the younger the pupils in question are, the closer they seem to be to the electronic media (Koyama & Takeuchi 2004: 77). Chen's findings indicate that electronic dictionaries can be better learning tools because of their format alone, as opposed to the ease in which multiple searches can be conducted (2011: 218). That view supports Laufer and Hill's (2000: 72) thinking that what matters most vis-a-vis word retention is greater attention during the lookup process. It appears that the visual impact created by the electronic dictionary and the prominent position afforded to the headword on the computer screen (as opposed to on a printed page) increases the likelihood of retention, as evidenced by the better retention scores obtained by those using electronic dictionaries in Chen's study.

3 The Study at Hand: Views of the Teachers and of the Children

This study was conducted with two types of participants: teachers in four Irish-language immersion schools and children in two specific upper class Irish-language immersion classroom settings. Two principle methodologies were employed to gather the information required: 1) the researcher informally contacted a number of teachers situated in immersion schools, and engaged in a number of informal conversations to deduce their experiences in dictionary use, and peripherally to gauge the suitability of that teacher's class for involvement in the second stage of the data collection; and 2) the researcher prepared a research questionnaire for completion by school pupils, which was dependent on the pupils' own consent, that of their parents & guardians, and that of the school authorities. Given that the pupils involved in this research could be designated as the learner or user in the context of the dictionary, and that an appropriate level of independence could be attributed to this pupils (on account of their age), it seemed appropriate that the main quantity of the information gathering would also focus on the said pupils².

² The teacher(s) of the said pupils, however, must not be neglected, as they have a role in styling the learning environment in which the pupil is located: they have the secondary function.

Three teachers were located in different parts of Dublin, one nearer the city centre and two in the suburbs; two in relatively affluent socio-economic settings, and one in a less advantageous setting³. A fourth school was then selected of a different variety: a newly-established immersion school in the South-East, located in a less than affluent socio-economic setting. All teachers were known to the researcher: two of whom were newly-trained graduates of the last 5 years, and the other two teachers were very experienced members of staff. In all cases, each of the schools was co-educational. Having conducted the informal conversations with the teachers in the selected schools, the focus of this study was narrowed a little further to two schools for the purpose of eliciting children to fill in the research questionnaire. The fourth above-mentioned school in the South-East made up the first of the two classes involved, with a split 5th and 6th class being the subject of the questionnaire, and the potential to involve up to 22 children. The second class utilised for the purposes of this particular piece of research was a 5th class in a long-standing immersion school in an affluent area, close to the city centre in Dublin, with 27 pupils potentially involved.

In selecting these two classes, it was important to secure the class teacher's consent and interest in the project before proceeding further, and also to survey a broad range of children (having obtained their parents'/guardians' prior consent), thus requiring a certain differentiation in the type of school, at hand. The researcher was satisfied that in surveying children, as pupils in these two schools, different contexts, and backgrounds in education and community would broadly be taken into account (insofar as this is possible, given the limitations of differentiation naturally associated with Irish language immersion education etc.). This informal quantitative survey was viewed as the best method of beginning newly-stated research in this area, and in the case of these schools, the researcher felt that the teachers' goodwill would also be maintained through this methodology.

In the case of the teachers, they agreed that the presence of a school-wide system for encouraging dictionary use in the immersion school was vital, and that in all four schools there was a formal system of graded dictionary-use, and graded dictionary-selection in place that extended from the infant to the upper-primary classes. This formal system would inevitably involve exposure to 1) pictorial dictionaries; 2) classroom dictionaries; 3) personal bilingual dictionaries; 4) frequent expected independent personal use of electronic resources; and 5) personal monolingual dictionaries. In each class, it was known at the beginning of the school year which dictionary should be purchased, if any. It was difficult to deduce, if the school-wide system was yielding results at all levels. In two of the four schools, it was also evident that while such a policy existed, it was not clearly relevant or generally part of the day-to-day language work of the class, and that time was never specifically allocated to the use of vocabulary games or tasks requiring dictionaries, in the vocabulary-building phases of the language lessons.

The teachers felt the need to divulge that in many cases, where dictionaries were being used in their classrooms, it was at their behest. In their opinion, best practice in terms of dictionary usage hinged upon the use of a notebook, and also the implementation of a graded, regular school policy. Many children would not, outside school, be in the habit of picking up and consulting a dictionary, and were most likely, to seek the meaning of a word from an adult. In the classroom context that very much meant that these schoolchildren were asking the teacher themselves about any and all unknown words they encountered.

³ In the case of each of these three Irish-language immersion schools, they were well-established for a number of years.

In cases where dictionaries were part of a consistent strategy of using lexicographical tools to assist vocabulary-building, the dictionaries themselves had to be accompanied by a small copy or notebook, where the child was to write down or note the new words (s)he encountered. If a teacher then collected these notebooks periodically, or began to develop a system, whereby the details contained in such notebooks were shared amongst all the pupils in the class, there was a great deal of educational benefit to be derived from the use of dictionaries at school by upper primary children. However, the teachers often felt that such were the constraints placed upon classroom time in Ireland by other whole-school matters or by the demands of all the subjects in the curriculum, that it was very difficult to organise, or invest time in the organisation of an effective system to share such newly created vocabulary. One teacher noted that it may be possible to upload new words to an in-class database of vocabulary, to which each pupil had access, if in the future; each student conducted much of their own personal vocabulary building work by using a desktop tablet or iPad of some sort.

Three of the four teachers identified that, in many cases, there was a conflict between the equivalent word that was sought or needed in the Irish language for a given word, available or known to a pupil in the English language, and the ability of the pupil, when having acquired the new word, to be able to explain its meaning completely, in the Irish language. Each of these three teachers admitted that they did not feel they spend sufficient time considering whether the basic requirement of equivalence of meaning was being satisfied. Their primary objective in explaining a new word to their students was to ensure that (s)he understood the concept being discussed, in the first language of the school. This, they thought, deserved further consideration.

Based on their experience, all four teachers believed that the need to seek new words in the Irish language, through the use of dictionary resources, occurred in their class on a daily basis. This was especially notable, during discrete ‘project’-devoted time, often channelled through the SESE (Social, Environmental and Scientific Education) curriculum. Children, in an immersion school, could, if permitted, be very dependent on their teacher to assist them with both dictionary use and vocabulary building. In one of the four classes, there was a designated pupil in the class that rotated on a weekly basis who was allowed look-up words on a computer, on behalf of all the children in his/her class. The children, they felt, generally preferred using the computer, and one teacher stated (as set out above) that she could envisage, in the future, an iPad approach being very helpful, in this type of scenario⁴.

While pictorial dictionaries were very useful in younger classes, a simple pocket dictionary that gave one or two clear and intelligible meanings for each of the headwords was in the opinion of the four teachers interviewed, the most suitable, especially from third class in primary school onwards. *Buntús Foclóra* (1981) was identified as the best of the best of the printed dictionaries for this particular purpose. The teachers felt that pictorial dictionaries would come into their own, especially in family homes, where the vocabulary building in schools could be scaffolded and developed further, by parents making use of easy-to-use pictorial dictionaries. Because the children loved using computers: www.tearma.ie continues to be the most recognised dictionary resource but

⁴ None of the four teachers were aware, in November 2012, of the impending availability (launched two months later in January 2013) of the electronic version of NEID, financed and prepared by the State, using the web-interface of www.focloir.ie.

www.potafocal.ie was fast catching up, and is considered to be simpler in terms of interface and recognition, i.e. more suitable for children than www.tearma.ie perhaps.

In one of the four teacher's schools, *WinGléacht* had been installed on one computer in each classroom in the school, allowing *Foclóir Gaeilge-Béarla* (or Irish-English Dictionary) (1977) (FGB) to be researched online. It was the view of that teacher, that if you had a very knowledgeable and fluent native speaker on the staff of the school, the availability of *WinGléacht* as an electronic lexicographical resource to them, and by extension, to the rest of the staff was 'great'. A copy of FGB was likely to be the visible class 'dictionary' in most cases, and would serve as a reference point, nearly always used by the teacher only. In two of the schools, *An Foclóir Beag* (AFB) (1990) (pocket monolingual Irish dictionary) was identified as a key resource, and one of those two teachers recommended that, as in her school, it would become a regular feature in all third class classrooms across Ireland and a required purchase for pupils going into fourth class. The simplicity and clarity of the explanations contained therein was the reason why, in their opinion, it was the best fit for school.

The interactive whiteboard (IWB) in the classroom was not felt to assist, in any substantive manner, as a method of dictionary display, because in most incidents, the meaning of words was not checked 'publicly'. One of the teachers involved in this survey could appreciate why a possible 'focal an lae' (or 'word of the day') exercise, using an online dictionary on the IWB could be quite useful, and educational, in terms of training his/her class how to use a dictionary properly. All four teachers felt that electronic dictionary resources would slowly replace all print forms, especially in the future, where a simple desk 'tablet' might be available to each pupil to complete their personal classroom tasks. If they, as teachers, needed to check a word, they would also be more inclined to use a computer.

As regards further training for dictionary use, on the one hand, all four teachers felt that the children in their classes had received such training, but after some gentler probing, none of the four teachers were quite able to pinpoint the precise occasions, when this training had occurred. They felt that any school could be divided into two distinct halves in regard to this question and that formal dictionary training was at the behest of the teacher, occurred incidentally and typically began in the third class (8/9 years of age). In the third class, the use of a dictionary for spelling, as distinct for vocabulary-building also became more pronounced.

In the case of the children, 38 of 49 potential participants proceeded to complete the consent forms. In all cases where participation did not occur, a consent form was not forthcoming from the pupil's parent or guardian⁵. The children's responses to the survey draw attention to a number of interesting features. It is clear that they perceive a need to use a dictionary and/or consult dictionary material quite regularly. Their choice of dictionary would seem to be determined by their adult teachers. Small pocket bilingual dictionaries appear to be the most widely used. Very little formal training in relation to lexicographical materials has been given to the group of students participating in this research, with the occasional child who had received dictionary training from a parent being the exception rather than the norm. This is, it is submitted, a major lacuna in these children's basic education (as a

⁵ The researcher delivered the consent forms and information leaflets to the relevant schools in mid-February 2013, and left a further two weeks for the returning and gathering of consent forms, before proceeding with the completion of the questionnaire itself during the first week in March 2013.

transferrable skill, applicable to all and any language learning). Ascertaining the correct meaning and the spelling of unknown words rank as the main reasons for upper primary school children to use a dictionary, above the need to find synonyms or check grammatical items.

On a general level, the participating children did not associate word searches using online dictionaries with a ‘real dictionary’. A real dictionary would appear to be printed book only, in their view. Most of the participating students still used printed dictionaries for looking up meanings, spelling etc. at this stage of their education. The majority of students felt that had they more words in/of themselves, they could potentially make better use of the dictionary. The majority also accepted however that were they not attending an immersion school, they might well not use their dictionaries/dictionary material, nearly as much. Respondents tended to indicate that a quick online search and/or help from an adult could get around the need to consult dictionary material, in paper form. Their teachers admitted that in terms of speed of reference, either of the last two approaches (e.g. looking up meanings etc. online or by asking their teacher) was seen as less hassle and something that the children were inclined to avail of, given the change.

The centrality of the printed dictionary (although all of its facets and information are not as well used as one might hope for) would suggest that it still plays a vital role in vocabulary building, especially in terms of receptive language skills. The interest and affinity among participating students and schools to the electronic interface would also suggest that electronic resources are already performing a similar role and will undoubtedly grow in terms of their prevalence and indeed their scope as this group of upper primary school students’ age.

4 Conclusions

As this work has identified, dictionary use assists second-language learners’ vocabulary development. Dictionary consultation is in many incidences, an initial step in learning a new word. It provides fast and reliable support for learners who have vocabulary and language limitations (Gonzalez 1999: 269). This research can confirm that, in an Irish language immersion setting:

- Dictionaries play a core role in the vocabulary building-strategies used in immersion classrooms. Dictionaries are consulted on a frequent, regular basis in a typical immersion classroom;
- Various pocket bilingual print dictionaries are used in these classrooms. The simpler the style, the more they are appreciated and relied upon, as indicated in the pupils’ choice of dictionary. Pictorial dictionaries do not feature amongst this particular age-group of learners and are typically associated with a younger age group (e.g. 0-5 years);
- The print dictionary still holds sway over the electronic resources presumably for practical and financial reasons, even though there is ample evidence to suggest that children in upper primary classes in immersion schools in 2013 would prefer to use electronic resources where possible;
- Training in dictionary use, and concerted efforts to utilise graded whole-school exposure to dictionary material need to be systematically developed and/or improved.

Language learning pupils should be encouraged to further engage in dictionary work. They also need to be instructed on how to do this, because proper dictionary usage is a skill in itself, learned and developed over time. It could be argued that because of the multiple demands of the *Primary School*

Curriculum (1999) in Ireland and the other extra-curricular and whole-school activities that vie for classroom time, teachers find it difficult to find the time to teach pupils how to use a dictionary. It is admitted however that the skill of how to use a dictionary properly is taught once and honed each time a pupil uses a dictionary. It is also argued that if that pupil goes on to learn a third, fourth or even fifth language, (s)he would draw on the same transferable dictionary-usage skills. Having taught their pupils how to use a dictionary properly, teachers can then build up their pupils' dictionary skills by carefully selecting and planning dictionary related tasks that can be done at home. In that way, pupils are enabled to become independent users and sow the seeds for language learning.

Adequate dictionary-use skills and pupils' access to good dictionaries combined will, in the majority of cases, result in greater word comprehension when compared to those who simply rely on contextual guessing. To conclude, as a vocabulary learning strategy, dictionary use deserves greater attention in L2 vocabulary research and pedagogy.

References

- Al-Ajmi, H. (2002). Which microstructural features of bilingual dictionaries affect users' look-up performance? In *International Journal of Lexicography* 15.2, pp. 119-131.
- Atkins, B.T.S. (1998). Using Dictionaries: Studies of Dictionary Use by Language Learners and Translators. In *Lexicografica Series Mayor*, p. 88.
- Bensoussan, M., Sim, D. & Weiss, R. (1984). The effect of dictionary usage on EFL test performance compared with student and teacher attitudes and expectations. In *Reading in a Foreign Language* 2, pp. 262-276.
- Bogaards, P. (1998). Using dictionaries: which words are looked up by foreign-language learners? In B.T.S. Atkins & K. Varantola, (eds.) *Studies of dictionary use by language learners and translators*. Tübingen: Niemeyer, pp. 151-157.
- Chan, A. (2011). Bilingualised or monolingual dictionaries? Preferences and practices of advanced ESL learners in Hong Kong. In *Language, Culture and Curriculum* 24.1, pp. 1-21.
- Chen, Y. (2011). Dictionary use and vocabulary learning in the context of reading. In *International Journal of Lexicography* 25.2, pp. 216–247.
- Crowley, T. (2005). Encoding Ireland: dictionaries and politics in Irish history. In *Éire-Ireland* 40.3+4: pp. 119-139.
- Gonzalez, O. (1999). Building vocabulary: dictionary consultation and the ESL student. In *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, pp. 264-270.
- Karbalaei, A. & Talebi, H. (2011). Assessing the Effect of Utilizing Monolingual and Bilingual Dictionary on Reading Comprehension of ESL Learners. In *American Journal of Scientific Research* 23, pp. 22-34.
- Knight, S. (1994). Dictionary use while reading: The effects on comprehension and vocabulary acquisition for students of different verbal abilities. In *The Modern Language Journal*, p. 78.
- Koyama, T. & Takeuchi, O. (2004). How look-up frequency affects EFL learning?: An empirical study on the use of handheld-electronic dictionaries. In W.M. Chan, K.N. Chin, P. Martin-Lau, & T. Suthiwan (eds.). *Proceedings of the CLaSIC 2004 Conference*, pp. 1018-1024.
- Laufer, B & Hill, M. (2000). What lexical information do L2 learners select in a call dictionary and how does it affect word retention? In *Language Learning and Technology* 3.2, pp. 58-76.

- Legac, V. & Horvatic, T. (2008). How do Croatian Learners of English from the County Medimurje Use their Dictionaries. In R. Lugossy, J. Horváth, and M. Nikolov (eds) *UPRT 2008: Empirical Studies in English Applied Linguistics*. Pécs: Lingus Franca Csoport, pp.165-189.
- Lupescu, S. & Day, R. (1993). Reading, dictionaries, and vocabulary learning. In *Language Learning* 43, pp. 263-287.
- Nic Pháidín, C. (2008). Corpus Planning for Irish – Dictionaries and Terminology. In C. Nic Pháidín & S. Ó Cearnaigh (eds.) *A New View of the Irish language*. Baile Átha Cliath: Cois Life, pp. 93-107.
- Opetushallitus (2004). *Perusopetuksen opetussuunnitelman perusteet*. Helsinki: Opetushallitus.
- [Poussi, A. (2010). Training in dictionary use: a teaching intervention in a 9th grade EFL Classroom in Finland. Unpublished Thesis May 2010 University of Jyväskylä].
- Prichard, C. (2008). Evaluating L2 readers' vocabulary strategies and dictionary use. In *Reading in a Foreign Language* 20.2, pp. 216–231. Accessed at <http://www.nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2008/prichard/prichard.html> [20.08.2012].
- Scholfield, P. (1982). Using the English dictionary for comprehension. In *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, pp. 185-194.
- Summers, D. (1988). The role of dictionaries in language learning. In R. Carter & M. McCarthy (eds.) *Vocabulary and language teaching*. London: Longman, pp. 111-125.