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Learning dictionary skills from Greek EFL coursebooks: How likely?

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Abstract

This paper presents a review of the dictionary-oriented material which is included in the EFL coursebooks used in Greek state secondary education. The aim of the study is to determine whether, to what extent and what kind of dictionary skills can be developed through the mainstream coursebooks under review. To this end, based on the relevant literature, a checklist of dictionary skills is first designed to serve as an evaluation tool for examining the coursebooks. Findings reveal an overall limited number of dictionary-oriented exercises, their random distribution across proficiency levels and the underrepresentation of basic receptive and productive dictionary skills. Therefore, since the coursebooks reviewed are not characterized by a thorough or informed treatment of dictionary skills, we may conclude that learning dictionary skills from coursebooks is rather unlikely. To address this gap, we offer suggestions as to how teaching materials can be modified or enriched with a view to developing learners' dictionary-using competence in a systematic way.

Keywords: dictionary skills; learners' dictionaries; coursebook evaluation; TEFL

1 Introduction

Dictionaries are generally recognized as useful learning tools; dictionary use figures in taxonomies of vocabulary learning strategies, it ranks high in users' preferences, and, in combination with inferencing, it considerably enhances vocabulary retention (Nation 2013; Schmitt 1997, 2000; Scholfield 1997). Recent advances in pedagogical lexicography seek to render dictionaries more accessible and user-friendly learning tools (Heuberger 2016; Rundell 1998); however, users cannot take full advantage of the wealth of information and facilities provided due to their poor dictionary skills (Chi 2013; Lew & Galas 2008). It is thus common practice for user-perspective researchers to emphasize the need for training users (native speakers, language learners, or translators) in how to make effective use of dictionaries (print or electronic, monolingual or bilingual) (Chi 2013: 182; Lew 2013:16; Pastor & Alcina 2010: 308). Although studies have focused on identifying users' needs and attitudes regarding dictionary use, practical aspects of dictionary use teaching such as "syllabuses for teaching users at various proficiency levels, teaching methodologies, materials and assessment" have not yet been explored (Chi 2013: 183). It is in this respect that this paper aims to make a contribution.

Focusing on the context of foreign language teaching in Greece, this study attempts to explore the role of dictionary skills in mainstream teaching materials. More precisely, we investigate whether dictionary pedagogy is integrated into the EFL coursebooks used in Greek state secondary education (Junior and Senior High School). The tool used for the evaluation of the coursebooks is a checklist designed to provide a detailed but concise overview of the treatment of dictionary skills. Section 2 sets the background of the survey study by presenting the checklist which acts (a) as a tool for reviewing the selected coursebooks in section 3 and (b) as a framework for proposing amendments in section 4.

2 Background of the survey

The first step in the review process is to decide on a classification of dictionary skills against which teaching materials are to be examined. Studies of dictionary skills often draw on Nesi's (1999) comprehensive taxonomy which is structured in terms of the stages in the consultation process (i.e. before study, before dictionary consultation, locating entry information, interpreting entry information, recording entry information, and understanding lexicographical issues). This classification framework has been variously used for specifying electronic dictionary skills (Lew 2013), for assessing the dictionary-oriented contents of textbooks (Molenda & Kiermasz 2013), or for relating dictionary skills to CEFR proficiency levels (Campoy-Cubillo 2015). Taking a different perspective, Nation (2013: 419-423) views dictionary use in relation to the task that prompts the consultation act and separates the dictionary skills needed for receptive use (i.e. reading, listening, L2-L1 translation) from those needed for productive use (i.e. writing, speaking, L1-L2 translation).

In light of the similarities and differences between the above specifications of dictionary skills, we

propose a checklist which foregrounds Nation's (2013) distinction between receptive and productive dictionary use, while also capturing the details of Nesi's (1999) taxonomy. This checklist, which is presented in Table 1, serves as a monitoring and evaluation tool for examining whether, and to what extent, Greek EFL coursebooks help Junior and Senior High School students develop dictionary skills. According to the national curriculum for teaching modern foreign languages in the Greek state school (<http://www.pi-schools.gr/programs/depps>), it is expected that, after the completion of secondary education, students will be able to use print and electronic dictionaries as sources of information (for receptive and productive tasks) and as a language learning strategy in general. However, more specific dictionary skills are not included in the competences expected to be developed.

	Steps	Skills
General dictionary awareness	Selecting a dictionary	1- Knowing what types of dictionary exist
		2- Knowing what kinds of information are found in dictionaries
Receptive dictionary use	Getting information from the context	3- Deciding on the part of speech of the look-up item
		4- Deciding on the form of the look-up item
		5- Guessing the general meaning of the look-up item
		6- Deciding whether consultation is necessary
	Finding the dictionary entry	7- Understanding the structure of the dictionary
		8- Understanding alphabetization and cross-referencing in print dictionaries
		9- Understanding the use of wildcards and hyperlinking in electronic dictionaries
		10- Interpreting the dictionary symbols for the different parts of speech
	Choosing the right sub-entry	11- Distinguishing the component parts of the entry
		12- Interpreting the L2 definitions or the L2-L1 translations
		13- Finding word groups (collocations, multi-word expressions)
	Relating look-up information to the context	14- Adapting the meaning found in the dictionary to the context of the word
		15- Evaluating the success of the search/ Recording entry information
Productive dictionary use	Finding the wanted word form	16- Finding an equivalent in a bilingual (L1-L2) dictionary
		17- Finding synonyms/opposites/word families/related words in a monolingual L2 dictionary or thesaurus
	Checking constraints on the use of the word	18- Interpreting restrictive labels concerning register, frequency, etc.
		19- Interpreting information concerning idiomatic and figurative use
	Working out the grammar and collocations of the word	20- Interpreting grammatical coding schemes and abbreviations
		21- Interpreting information about collocations
		22- Deriving information from examples
	Checking the form of the word before using it	23- Finding information about the spelling of words
		24- Interpreting IPA and pronunciation information

Table 1: A checklist of dictionary skills.

3 Critical review of coursebooks

Against this background, we proceed to identify and classify the dictionary-oriented materials included in seven EFL student's books (ranging from A1+ to B2+ CEFR level) and five workbooks (accompanying Junior High School student's books). All these textbooks are used in mainstream High Schools and are accessible in electronic form through the Digital School Project platform (<http://ebooks.edu.gr>). This platform not only includes .pdf versions of the print textbooks but also enriched versions with multimedia content such as “the audio of the listening comprehension tasks, suggested answers and models, additional references such as illustrations and word definitions, games, quizzes, videos and documentaries” (Mitsikopoulou 2014: 413). The digitally enriched resources are also examined with a view to identifying materials that aim at developing dictionary skills.

To provide an accurate picture of the attention that dictionary skills receive, Table 2 displays the number of dictionary-oriented exercises included in each one of the school books under review. What is striking is that the overall number of dictionary-related exercises is rather limited and that there is no clear pattern in their distribution across proficiency levels. Using the checklist of dictionary skills proposed above, we can present a more detailed picture of the specific dictionary skills represented in the teaching materials. Table 3 thus shows how many times each dictionary skill is targeted by the coursebooks.¹ A close look at Table 3 reveals that the skills related to productive dictionary use are more underrepresented than the skills related to receptive dictionary use. It is noteworthy that the skills most frequently involved in the exercises are “deciding whether consultation is necessary”, “interpreting the L2 definitions or the L2-L1 translations” and “finding word families in a monolingual L2 dictionary”; on the contrary, skills related to context –both getting information from context (reception) and incorporating information into context (production)– are notably absent (see skills 3-5 and 18-22 at Table 3).

Although the ability to use a dictionary is included in self-assessment sections of some student's books, no steps seem to be taken to help learners gradually develop this vocabulary learning strategy. Digital enrichment could be a unique opportunity to fill this gap and promote electronic dictionary skills; yet, only L2 glossaries have until now been added at the beginning of each unit without any awareness raising activities. Lastly, in examining coursebooks which address students of different grades, we would expect dictionary skills –similarly to other skills– to be graded along the continuum of proficiency levels; yet that is not the case. To sum up, the study reveals that dictionary skills are not treated in a thorough or systematic manner in the EFL teaching materials reviewed.

CEFR levels	EFL school books under review	Number of dictionary-oriented exercises
A1+	1st Grade of Junior High School: Student's Book (Beginners)	9
	1st Grade of Junior High School: Workbook (Beginners)	3
A2	1st Grade of Junior High School: Student's Book (Advanced)	9
	1st Grade of Junior High School: Workbook (Advanced)	1
A2	2nd Grade of Junior High School: Student's Book (Beginners)	2
	2nd Grade of Junior High School: Workbook (Beginners)	1
B1	2nd Grade of Junior High School: Student's Book (Advanced)	1
	2nd Grade of Junior High School: Workbook (Advanced)	6
B1+	3rd Grade of Junior High School: Student's Book	1
	3rd Grade of Junior High School: Workbook	1
B2	1st Grade of Senior High School: Student's Book	3
B2+/C1-	2nd & 3rd Grade of Senior High School: Student's Book	2

Table 2: The total number of dictionary-oriented exercises in the school books under review.

¹ The total number of tokens exceeds the number of exercises because some exercises target more than one dictionary skills.

Dictionary skills	1st Grade of Junior High School		2nd Grade of Junior High School		3rd Grade of Junior High School (B1+)		1st Grade of Senior High School (B2)	2nd & 3rd Grade of Senior High School (B2+/C1-)
	Beginners (A1+)	Advanced (A2)	Beginners (A2)	Advanced (B1)	Student's Book	Workbook	Student's Book	Student's Book
	Student's Book	Student's Book	Student's Book	Student's Book	Student's Book	Workbook	Student's Book	Student's Book
	Book	Book	Book	Book	Book	Book	Book	Book
General dictionary awareness								
1- Knowing what types of dictionary exist	-	2	-	-	-	-	2	1
2- Knowing what kinds of information are found in dictionaries	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-
Receptive dictionary use								
3- Deciding on the part of speech of the look-up item	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
4- Deciding on the form of the look-up item	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
5- Guessing the general meaning of the look-up item	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
6- Deciding whether consultation is necessary	1	2	-	1	3	1	2	1
7- Understanding the structure of the dictionary	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
8- Understanding alphabetization and cross-referencing in print dictionaries	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9- Understanding the use of wildcards and hyperlinking in electronic dictionaries	-	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
10- Interpreting the dictionary symbols for the different parts of speech	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
11- Distinguishing the component parts of the entry	-	1	-	-	1	-	-	-
12- Interpreting the L2 definitions or the L2-L1 translations	3	3	2	3	1	1	3	1

Dictionary skills	1st Grade of Junior High School			2nd Grade of Junior High School			3rd Grade of Junior High School (B1+)	1st Grade of Senior High School (B2)	2nd & 3rd Grade of Senior High School (B2+/C1-)
	Beginners (A1+)		Advanced (A2)	Beginners (A2)		Advanced (B1)			
	Student's Workbook Book	Student's Workbook	Student's Workbook Book	Student's Workbook Book	Student's Workbook	Student's Workbook Book			
13- Finding word groups (collocations, multi-word expressions)	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
14- Adapting the meaning found in the dictionary to the context of the word	-	2	-	1	-	2	-	-	-
15- Evaluating the success of the search/ Recording entry information	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	1	-
Productive dictionary use									
16- Finding an equivalent in a bilingual (L1-L2) dictionary	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
17- Finding synonyms/opposites/word families/related words in a monolingual L2 dictionary or thesaurus	-	3	-	-	-	2	-	-	-
18- Interpreting restrictive labels concerning register, frequency, etc.	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
19- Interpreting information concerning idiomatic and figurative use	-	-	-	-	1	-	-	-	-
20- Interpreting grammatical coding schemes and abbreviations	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
21- Interpreting information about collocations	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-	-
22- Deriving information from examples	-	-	1	-	1	-	-	-	-
23- Finding information about the spelling of words	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
24- Interpreting IPA and pronunciation information	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 3: The number of tokens (instances) assigned to each dictionary skill.

4 Suggestions for developing dictionary skills through coursebooks

Addressing the limitations highlighted above, this section provides some directions towards an informed inclusion of dictionary-related materials in EFL coursebooks. Firstly, coursebooks should guide learners to use different dictionary types in light of Campoy-Cubillo's (2015) proposal for defining and grading dictionary skills according to CEFR proficiency levels. Random references to different dictionary types in textbooks for beginners or vague references to "a dictionary" should be replaced by a clear progression from a bilingual dictionary (A1, A2) to a simplified monolingual L2 glossary (B1) to a monolingual L2 dictionary for advanced learners (B2-C2).

Secondly, learners need to be trained in using dictionaries as sources of information for both receptive and productive tasks by contextualizing their look-ups. In the case of receptive dictionary use, it is important that learners are involved in guessing meaning from context before looking up an unknown item; a combination of inferencing (requiring depth of processing) and dictionary use (making sure the information retained is correct) would best promote vocabulary retention. In the case of productive dictionary use, learners should receive considerable practice in finding not only the desired L2 form but also its typical context (lexicogrammatical, pragmatic, etc.). Two examples are provided in the Appendix to demonstrate how coursebook exercises can be modified with a view to developing receptive and productive dictionary skills respectively. The implication is that dictionary-using competence is enhanced when options are removed from matching exercises and (intermediate) learners are motivated to search for the missing information (meaning or collocation) in a monolingual learners' dictionary (*Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*).

Lastly, learners should progress from using dictionaries as sources of information to using them as discovery learning tools. For example, digitally enriched (upper) intermediate coursebooks could include links to resources (such as thesauri and corpus-based examples banks) incorporated in electronic dictionaries, and motivate learners to explore them in relation to receptive and productive tasks. In this way, dictionary use can promote learner autonomy.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to present an overview of the treatment of dictionary skills in the EFL coursebooks used in Greek state secondary education. The survey of 7 student's books, their digitally enriched versions and 4 workbooks clearly shows a dearth of dictionary-oriented exercises, their uneven distribution across proficiency levels and the underrepresentation of basic receptive and productive dictionary skills. Taking account of the prominent role of coursebooks in the EFL classrooms of Greek state schools, the implication of this study is that students do not receive explicit or adequate training in dictionary use. In an attempt to fill this gap, we have offered suggestions for systematically enhancing dictionary skills across different proficiency levels to meet learners' reception and production needs. Modifying or enriching existing teaching materials in light of these suggestions would make a contribution towards developing a dictionary culture within the mainstream education system.

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Appendix

Match the words below in the text (1-8) with their definitions (a-h).

1. robust	a. financial support
2. insight	.....	b. reach a point of highest development
3. refinement	.....	c. identify with great accuracy or precision
4. scrutiny	.....	d. the process of making a substance pure
5. agency	.....	e. strong and reliable
6. funding	.....	f. organisation representing a group of people
7. culminate	.....	g. clear understanding of a complicated problem
8. pinpoint	.....	h. detailed examination to get more information

Find these words in the text (page 51). Guess their meaning and check your answers in the dictionary.

(1st Grade of Senior High School – Student's book)

Scientists will now have to show their work will not only produce physiological insights but will also generate statistically **robust** data. If not, they will lose their funding.

ro·bust /rəˈbʌst, ˈrɒbʌst \$ rəˈbʌst, ˈrou-/ adjective LONGMAN

- a robust person is strong and healthy
 - a robust man of six feet four
 - ▶ see thesaurus at **healthy**
- a robust system, organization etc is strong and not likely to have problems
 - The formerly robust economy has begun to weaken.
- a robust object is strong and not likely to break **SYN** sturdy
 - a robust metal cabinet
 - ▶ see thesaurus at **strong**

Figure 1: Modifying a sample matching exercise to promote receptive dictionary use.

Complete each sentence by matching the appropriate adjective a-e to each noun in sentences 1-5.

a) ridiculous b) blonde c) ornate d) aristocratic e) sudden

- My aunt had a desire to dye her hair black.
- In Ancient Egypt the ladies wore make-up on their faces.
- Some kids wear the most colour T-shirts.
- Ifigenia has decided to get some highlights in her hair.
- In the Byzantine Empire, the ladies wore purple dresses and chlamys.

(3rd Grade of Junior High School – Workbook)

Complete each sentence and check your answers in the dictionary.

COLLOCATIONS LONGMAN

ADJECTIVES

great/strong
His one great desire in life was to own a Mercedes.
The desire was too strong to resist.

overwhelming (=so strong that it takes control of you)
He felt an overwhelming desire for a cigarette.

deep/fierce (=very great)
The people of the village had a deep desire for revenge.

a genuine/real desire
All her life she had a genuine desire to help the poor.

a natural desire
Kids have a natural desire to find out about new things.

a burning desire (=an extremely strong desire)
She had a burning desire to pack her case and leave.

an insatiable desire (=a desire that cannot be satisfied)
She had an insatiable desire for publicity.

Figure 2: Modifying a sample matching exercise to promote productive dictionary use.