

Not all dictionaries are created equal: Some considerations towards improving the effectiveness of dictionary use in EFL

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Abstract

This paper attempts to draw attention to the importance of making informed decisions regarding the use of dictionaries in EFL contexts. Random entries from two arbitrarily chosen dictionaries are examined according to the following criteria: (1) clarity of definition(s), (2) order of presentation of the different meanings of a word, (3) grammatical advice, and (4) insights into the use of collocations. The findings of this analysis suggest that these two dictionaries differ in many respects. Pedagogical implications are discussed, and some suggestions to assist EFL teachers in making more informed dictionary choices are offered.

1 . Introduction

Having taught EFL courses in tertiary education in Japan over the past decade, the author has noticed that one of the requirements of learners often found in EFL course syllabi is that they possess a dictionary. Sometimes, the syllabus mentions something to the effect that English to English dictionaries are preferred; however, unfortunately for students in many cases, that is the extent of the information provided. In other words, learners are often not given any specific information regarding what kind of dictionary they should buy and what, specifically, they will need it for. In addition, once learners show up to their first class with their new dictionary, they rarely receive any sort of follow-up information and/or training regarding how to best understand and use the features of their dictionary. Hence, the aim of this paper is to demonstrate that, as the title conveys, not all dictionaries are created equal, and teachers would thus be well-served in spending the time to make more informed decisions regarding the dictionaries they recommend their learners to purchase (Cowie 2009).

2 . Analysis

To demonstrate the potential differences between dictionaries, this paper will provide a comparison of various entries and features found in two arbitrarily chosen English to English dictionaries: the *Longman Dictionary Of Contemporary English Third edition* (1995) and *Random House Webster's Concise College Dictionary* (1999). While these dictionaries may appear some-

what dated, they were chosen for the practical reason that they were among two of the dictionaries that the author's students recently brought with them to class. In providing a framework for this analysis, this paper examines the strengths and weaknesses of various entries found in the two dictionaries according to the following criteria: (1) the clarity of definition(s), including any support from illustrations, examples etc., (2) the likely reason for order of presentation of the different meanings of a word, (3) the advice on grammar (clarity, usefulness etc), and (4) insights on collocation (range, clarity etc).

2.1 Clarity

Regarding clarity of definitions, a review of the Longman dictionary finds that the entries therein generally provide explicit definitions, and often include examples and illustrations. In contrast, Random House's entries are generally brief and give infrequent examples and illustrations. SLA (Secondary Language Acquisition) research tells us that a distinction can be made between passive and active vocabulary (Ellis 1995). Dictionary entries containing examples offer the reader a better chance to actively learn a new word, enabling the reader to use the word appropriately in context. Furthermore, Random House's definitions contain complex vocabulary that often forces the reader to cross reference. This would require subsequent time and may cause confusion among EFL students. Further, EFL students often encounter cultural inconsistencies when using dictionaries. For example, Random House does not usually distinguish between British and American English. Random House's (1999: 198) entry of *crisp* does not mention that a *crisp* defined in British English is a potato chip in American English. In this sense, their entries would seem to be culture-specific toward American English. The definition of *crisp* in Longman (1995: 322) includes and identifies both the British and American meaning. For EFL students, these inconsistencies are likely to create confusion and may even cause students to question the validity of the word.

2.2 Organization

Additionally, polysemy can be problematic for EFL students when using a dictionary. Generally, dictionaries seem to present words with multiple meanings in the order they are most frequently used. Longman explains how this is determined in their dictionary guide: ' This dictionary is based on analysis of large corpora of written and spoken English, which shows how often a word or phrase is used, and how often it is used in each meaning ' (Longman 1995: xvi). In some cases, students have trouble dealing with the presentation of words from a clarity standpoint. With longer entries, Longman includes signposts to aid the reader in finding the meaning they need. For instance, Longman's (1995: 1072) entry of *place* contains signposts / subheadings in bold letters underneath the entry heading. As well, they divide each definition into sub definitions, and they are presented separately. These features make it easier and faster for students to find information. The presentation of Random House's (1999: 627) definition of *place* does not seem to be user friendly for EFL students as large amounts of text often appear clustered in small areas. Many students might be confused and even intimidated by this.

2 . 3 Grammatical advice

Similar to confusion caused by organizational issues, EFL students often have difficulty discerning grammatical advice given in dictionaries. They often fail to read the conventions of the dictionary (i.e., found in the introduction and/or at the back of the dictionary). Longman and Random House both offer readers useful grammatical advice. Their entries show the readers the word class (noun, verb, adjective, etc.) to which the headword belongs, and give information about the inflections of words. Longman goes further by providing additional grammatical advice in square brackets showing the countability of nouns, and whether a verb is transitive or intransitive. It also explains how the word is used syntactically, with examples of conventional as well as idiomatic expressions involving the word often provided. Without question, these are invaluable inclusions for EFL students as they can obtain information about a word that will give them the confidence to use it in different situations. For instance, Longman's definition of *verify* includes a syntactical illustration, with instruction on collocations. Directly underneath the first definition it states ' *verify sth with sb* ' (Longman 1995: 1590). This feature illustrates the patterns of which words combine to form sentences. Accordingly, students can manipulate the words to serve their language function.

Students would probably gain only a passive understanding of *verify* based on the definition provided in Random House (1999: 906). Besides lacking in grammatical advice, it contains other weaknesses. The vocabulary used in the definition could be perceived as being too complex for many EFL students, and the order of presentation seems inconsistent with other dictionaries. Their first definition includes the words *testimony* and *evidence* as used in a court. *Verify* is most commonly used to seek the truth or confirm, but not necessarily in a court room. Hence, this entry may be thought to be culture-specific in the sense that it seems to assume that the entire world practices law similarly. It also seems to be profession-specific in that it appears better suited for those in the legal profession.

2 . 4 Using Collocations

Although students generally enjoy learning idiomatic phrases, they often seem to have difficulties with collocations. In their book, *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*, Carter and McCarthy (1988) explain that this difficulty is caused by the different degrees of variability of fixed expressions. One of the main aims of the Longman (1995: xvi) dictionary is to show explicitly the collocation of a word. Their entry of *crisp* includes an example of how *crisp* and *burn* are used together in American English. In bold letters, it reads ' *burn sth to a crisp* ' (Longman 1995: 322). Similarly, Longman's (1995: 1066) entry of *pilot* displays the relationship *pilot* has with other words such as *test*, *project*, and *scheme* as a restricted collocation. In contrast, Random House's (1999: 198 , 623) entries of *crisp* and *pilot* only present definitions and do not provide insights on collocations. From Random House's definitions, EFL students probably cannot recognize how English can be expressed through fixed combinations of words. Consequently, their understanding of the word would be limited, and they would most likely only be able to learn the

word passively.

3 . Pedagogical implications

While the analysis above was in no way meant to be an exhaustive examination of dictionary features, it served its purpose in demonstrating that, as the title of this article states, there can be great variability in terms of dictionaries that learners use in their classes. Recently, electronic dictionaries have become increasingly popular in Japan, and while their benefits have been documented, so too has the fact that that EFL learners in Japan are generally not taking advantage of either the portability or the extra speed that they paid for (Weschler & Pitts 2000). Moreover, there are some learners who prefer bilingual dictionaries because of the seemingly easier, more accessible and immediate payback. While bilingual glosses do indeed help and give immediately accessible learning pegs to the user, it seems to be generally agreed in ELT that monolingual dictionaries are better for the students in the long run for many reasons (University of Leicester 1999). First, the notion that learners are saving time by using a bilingual dictionary is not necessarily true as bilingual dictionary users are frequently required to spend a great deal of time engaging in detailed cross-referencing to make sure one has indentified the most appropriate sense of the word. Even more important is the fact that there are very few words that maintain an exact correspondence in meaning and use with an equivalent in a foreign language. Lastly, there are also those in ELT who believe learners should limit their use of dictionaries in class as it may detract from their foci and/or impede the amount of contact and communication learners can potentially have with their teachers (Futonge 2005). This, however, may have more to do with learners lacking the skills to use their dictionaries effectively. When used effectively, dictionaries can be thought to act as supplemental teachers, or in a different light, dictionaries may help learners to not be as reliant on their teachers by helping them develop a sense of autonomy and responsibility for their own learning.

From the analysis above, the author will provide some basic suggestions to assist teachers in choosing the most appropriate dictionary for their context. First and foremost, it is necessary to point out that every situation is different, and teachers would be well-served in understanding precisely who their students are, what purpose(s) the dictionary use is intended to serve, and how specifically students plan to use their dictionaries. By the same token, teachers have to keep in mind that learners will undoubtedly use their dictionaries in other English related classes as well as in situations outside the classroom context. Thus, while it is generally wise for teachers to have specific ideas for dictionary use in mind when recommending a dictionary to their students, they should also consider dictionaries that offer students flexibility, and of course, cost-effectiveness.

For English majors in tertiary institutions, it would seem to make sense that monolingual advanced learner dictionaries with many features be considered first as they would open students up to new language and, as mentioned above, contain more accurate representations of a word's meaning. Further, in order to make the best use of this type of dictionary, learners need to

receive some training regarding the conventions of the dictionary, which are most often described in the introductions and/or the back covers of dictionaries. In a brief informal survey of some learners in this context, twenty of twenty-two students in an English Oral Communication class admitted that they essentially ignored the information related to the conventions of their dictionaries. This type of training should take place at the beginning of a course and may include advice on abbreviations, lay-out of entries, grammatical explanations, how verbs are treated, finding canonical forms, phrasal verbs, etc. While any directive towards these conventions is likely to be helpful, teachers are encouraged to be creative in designing activities to teach these points. Publishers often offer suggestions and tasks to help learners train for this endeavor, and there also exist workbooks and CD ROMs specifically designed to prepare learners for the use of dictionaries (Runcie 2004). Lastly, not only does learner training for dictionary use need to account for what information is available and how it can be accessed, but it also needs to show the limitations of the dictionary (i.e., what is absent and/or what difficulties might arise). This may involve limitations in such areas as space, the selection of examples, the need for cross-referencing, and the difficulty of defining function words, to name a few.

4 . Conclusion

The differences between the Longman and Random House dictionaries illustrate the importance of choosing a well-informed dictionary. Without a doubt, a dictionary that offers students additional information is most beneficial for them in developing their vocabulary. It should include clear and comprehensible entries, concrete examples, illustrations, grammatical advice, guidance regarding cultural differences, and insights into the use of collocations. EFL learners generally seem to like dictionaries that are user friendly which include uncomplicated vocabulary and entries presented in a way that is clear and helps them find information quickly. The purpose here is not to criticize one publisher's dictionary and promote another; rather, it is to make teachers conscious of the many differences that can exist among dictionaries. At first glance, one might assume that the Webster's dictionary, which is more than twice as large and published four years later, would be the better choice, but it is the Longman dictionary that is, in fact, more suitable to the needs of the author's learners.

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