



## Dictionaries:

### Use and Function in the ESL Classroom

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## The need for dictionaries in the ESL classroom:

- ▶ Dictionaries empower students by making them responsible for their own learning.
- ▶ Once students are able to use a dictionary well, they are self-sufficient in finding the information on their own.
- ▶ Dictionaries present a very useful tool in the ESL classroom. However, teachers need to **EXPLICITLY** teach students skills so that they can be utilized to maximum extent.
- ▶ Dictionary use can enhance vocabulary acquisition and comprehension.
- ▶ If the dictionary is sufficiently current, and idiomatic colloquialisms are included, the student can [also] see representations of contemporary culture as seen through language.

## Why teachers need to explicitly teach dictionary skills:

- ▶ "If we do not teach students how to use the dictionary, it is unlikely that they will demand that they be taught, since, while teachers do not believe that students have adequate dictionary skills, students believe that they do" (Bilash, Gregoret & Loewen, 1999, p.4).
- ▶ Dictionaries are not self-explanatory; directions need to be made clear so that students can disentangle information, and select the appropriate meaning for the task at hand.
- ▶ Students need to learn how a dictionary works, how a dictionary or reference resource can help them, and also how to become aware of what they need and what kind of dictionary will best respond to their needs.



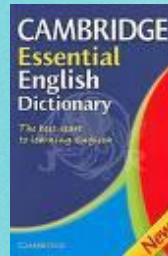
## Dictionary use skills:

- ▶ Teachers need to firstly make sure that students are acquainted and familiar with the alphabet and its order.
- ▶ Secondly, teachers need to orientate students as to what a dictionary entails, its functions, and relative terminology. Teachers should focus on areas such as alphabetical ordering of vocabulary, appendices, and location of guide words and head words.
- ▶ Thirdly, teachers should expose students to proper use of the dictionary by having students participate in a guided/scaffolded orientation to an entry. Teachers should have students look up a designated word. Teachers should also bring focus to the consideration that in many circumstances, more than one definition exists for a word, and that students must use both context and their background knowledge to select the appropriate definition for the task.
- ▶ Fourthly, teachers need to make sure that students have many opportunities (both independently and collaboratively) to practice these dictionary skills so that they can be refined. Teachers can do this by either using dictionaries to complement various content activities, or by using dictionary-discovery activities.

- ▶ As students become more familiar and comfortable with basic dictionary use skills, teachers can incorporate other features of dictionaries by asking questions about maps, biographies, color plates and acronyms found in a dictionary. This will also help students build helpful background cultural knowledge as well as see the vast amount of useful information found in a dictionary.
- ▶ Teachers can facilitate dictionary use in the classroom by: familiarizing students with the various dictionaries available, and by modeling their use (i.e. Explicitly using them in various reading/writing activities-- "This word, entrepreneur, is a tough word. Does anyone know what this word means? What can we do to find out? Let's look in the dictionary!")
- ▶ In order to learn how a dictionary can help them, students must receive explicit guided feedback as well as learn to self-assess.

## The different types of dictionaries available to ESL teachers and learners:

## Monolingual (English-English) Dictionaries



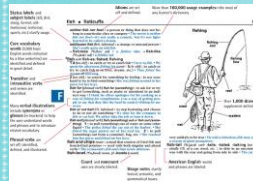
- ▶ Native speaker intended.
- ▶ Uses same language for words and definitions.

## Bilingual (L1-L2) Dictionaries



- ▶ Uses both native language and target second language.
- ▶ Translations are usually direct from one language to the other.

## Learner Dictionaries



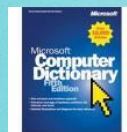
- ▶ Written for foreign language learners.
- ▶ Contains simple definitions and relatively small word lists.
- ▶ Written by language specialists specifically for language students.
- ▶ Contains notes regarding cultural connotations (whether the word is formal or dated).
- ▶ Try to disambiguate similar words (i.e. borrow and lend).
- ▶ Place words into context so as to give ELLs examples of how real language is used.
- ▶ Elementary: approximately 3,000 word list.
- ▶ Advanced: approximately 5,000 word list.

## Picture Dictionaries



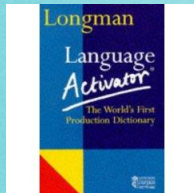
- ▶ Another type of Learner Dictionary.
- ▶ Illustrates the meaning of words.
- ▶ Excellent for beginner and basic skills.
- ▶ <http://www.pdictionary.com/english/browse.php?db=animals>
- ▶ <http://visual.merriam-webster.com/>

## Electronic/Multimedia Dictionaries



- ▶ Computer or Compact Disk format.
- ▶ Easily accessible information.
- ▶ Interactive.
- ▶ Current and up to date.
- ▶ <http://www.wordreference.com/>

## Production Dictionaries



- ▶ Puts words of the same topic, or words with similar meanings in close vicinity so that they can be easily compared.
- ▶ Helps students to discover new words more easily.

## Pocket Dictionaries



- ▶ More accessible size and format of various dictionaries (i.e. bilingual, monolingual, learner, etc.)
- ▶ Excellent for students to have as their own resource.
- ▶ Come in both electronic and paperback models.

## Matching dictionaries with learners needs:

- ▶ Firstly, students need to have some sort of developed word list (making sure they have some sort of fluency in both L1 and L2 of which to draw upon for background information) before being exposed to dictionaries. ELLs should have a fair grasp of about 2,000 words from the general service list of common words.
- ▶ It is a good idea to begin ELLs with bilingual dictionaries as this often provides as a more appropriate resource due to an underdeveloped level of proficiency, as well it will help to make translations quicker, easier, and more efficient.
- ▶ Bilingual dictionaries help to provide a sense of security to the ELL as words are presented in contexts that they can decipher (both in L1 and L2).
- ▶ However, bilingual dictionaries are often proficient enough only in the beginning stages of language acquisition, as continuous reliance can result in "bilingual dictionary reflex" where the student relies solely on use of the dictionary rather than incorporating elements of background knowledge and context to solve tasks.

- ▶ When students acquire and develop more proficient levels of L2 (approximately 3,000 words), teachers should incorporate and combine the use of bilingual and learner/monolingual dictionaries together.
- ▶ Students can use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries to 'decode' the language (find meanings) and to 'encode' it (guess the meanings of missing words).
- ▶ Incorporating the use of monolingual dictionaries requires more mental effort on behalf of the learner, and thus resulting in better retention.

## Learners Dictionary Checklist



- # of headwords
- quality of the entries
- student proficiency level
- features in the dictionary
- ease of understanding symbols and pronunciation syst.
- clarity of the layout
- size and weight
- AVAILABILITY

## When should and shouldn't students use dictionaries:

- ▶ The essential function of any dictionary is to define lexical terms, resulting in a richer, more accurate vocabulary.
- ▶ Secondly, dictionaries are used to find the grammatical function of a particular word.
- ▶ Thirdly, dictionaries are also used to determine the correct extension of a word in the case where a single word, often a high frequency word, has multiple definitions.
- ▶ Students should learn how to deal with unknown words and to turn to the dictionary only when absolutely necessary.
- ▶ The long term goal of dictionary use and instruction is to make the student independent of teachers and dictionaries. When the student is engaged in fluency work (i.e. conversation or reading) continuous use of a dictionary will interrupt the natural flow of communication. Thus, the dictionary should be used only as a resource to support learning, not a learning tool in itself.
- ▶ Students should be encouraged to use background knowledge and to take chances regarding tasks before turning to the use of dictionaries.



▶ Dictionaries should be used with regulation as “the use of dictionaries can encourage students to function at a word level rather than using content to decipher meaning,” thus further hampering communicative and learning fluency efforts (Bilash, Gregoret & Loewen, 1999, p.4).

▶ Yet another reason for the use of regulation is that the use of dictionaries “sometimes enables students to use which they do not yet fully comprehend; innumerable problems with polysemy, words with multiple extensions, and homonyms can arise from indiscriminate or uninformed use of dictionaries” (Bilash, Gregoret & Loewen, 1999 p.4).



## ACTIVITIES:

Ways to incorporate dictionary use in the classroom

## Complementary Activities

- Teachers can incorporate the use of dictionaries into various writing activities as part of the revising and editing stage(s).
- Students can use the dictionary to look up unfamiliar terms related to science and social studies content (developing CALP).
- Students can use dictionaries to provide and develop definitions for various content related words for class word walls.
- Dictionaries can also be used to teach students that language is influenced by other languages.
- Teachers can use the strategy, vocabulary role play, to teach students new words using/incorporating TPR methods

• <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/r.html>

## Dictionary Discovery Activities

- Students with an elementary level knowledge of the L2 could expand their vocabulary by scanning the dictionary for words recently added to the language or for words that come directly from L1.
- Students with an intermediate level of knowledge of a second language could expand their vocabulary by checking up on how prefixes and suffixes alter the meanings of words.
- Learners with advanced level knowledge of the second language work with single words to uncover their many usages and meanings.

- Students can create their own (individual or class) picture dictionaries using vocabulary from various content areas, so as to create a more specific/commonly used target language resource.
- Students partner up and try to decipher which is the correct definition for various content words. Students need to choose between the correct/dictionary definition and a false student created definition.
- Students are placed in pairs or teams and search for words based upon information/clues given by the teacher. This activity can be adapted to focus on both different parts of words and different functions of the dictionary.

## Conclusion

- ▶ “Dictionaries are the instruments of lifelong learning; it is to them that we turn to revive our second language skills and to enhance our native vocabulary” (Bilash, Gregoret & Loewen, 1999, p.4).
- ▶ Dictionaries can become an important tool for ESL students. They can help build vocabulary, comprehension and independence.
- ▶ Dictionaries not only teach students skills related to vocabulary and word recognition; they also develop upon the interaction between language and culture.
- ▶ Teachers need to build, reinforce, and model dictionary use skills at all times possible. This does not need to be a separate class or English only, but instead, should be integrated into all classes.

- ▶ Dictionary learning and training needs to be fun and motivating (so that students will enjoy using them, become comfortable with them as a learning resource, and experience success).
- ▶ Teachers need to allow plenty of time for both mistakes and exploration. As well as clarifying when necessary and providing appropriate feedback (recognizing and discussing both errors and successes).
- ▶ Teachers need to strive to foster a good balance between dictionary dependence and independence for learners.

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