
THE IMPORTANCE OF USING DICTIONARY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

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The purpose of this article is to examine the importance of using dictionary in language learning / teaching process and make some suggestions for language teachers as well as language students.

A dictionary is a reference book containing the words of a language usually alphabetically arranged, with information on their forms, pronunciations, functions, meanings, etymologies, spellings and idiomatic uses. Most of this information cannot be found in other reference books. It is important to consider several advantages in the use of dictionaries. In the very early stages of learning, even an inadequate bilingual dictionary can provide an important support and be a quick reference book. In language learning/teaching process the importance of using dictionaries cannot be denied. It is obvious that the dictionary can be an extremely useful learning resource, especially as it makes the learner more independent of the teacher.

If the students learn how to use a dictionary effectively, then the dictionary can be a very helpful resource for their studies. Training in the proper use of a dictionary will be of help in selecting the meaning that is appropriate to a given context. The most important basic skill in using a dictionary is to find a word or

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expression one has in mind. Then, one has to find out the meaning of the word, however, there is a problem of choosing of appropriate meaning to the given context when several meanings are defined. For instance, we can identify many senses of the word "see" by means of a dictionary exploitation.

- 1) I can't see Lydia anywhere. (perceive with the eye)
- 2) The security guard asked to see our passes. (inspect)
- 3) Can you see what I mean? (understand)
- 4) We are going to see a film tonight. (be a spectator at)
- 5) I could see that you were having an argument with him. (perceive with the eye)
- 6) I'd like to see the manager please. I have a complaint. (have a meeting with)

When the above dictionary definitions and example sentences are examined, it is seen that each sentence can be interpreted differently because of the contextual clues and different dictionary definitions for the same word . Therefore, it is safe to advise language students to analyse the different meanings of an unknown word by means of dictionary usage.

Some students may not be aware of the efficient ways of using a dictionary. In general, they only take the entry as the final option and do not explore other possibilities of meaning or they do not usually think of looking up a familiar word like "bring", "call " or "get". But the meanings of these words may change depending on the usage of them in different contexts and may create difficulty for language students. Haphazardness of students while using dictionaries for their specific lexical needs may sometimes bring about deficient or erroneous interpretations for the students are inclined to adopt the first meaning they happen to come across without bothering themselves for the rest. Thus, when we introduce techniques for using dictionaries, we should teach students to look up a word that seems familiar, when it appears in a sentence that is difficult to understand. For instance, the word "chair" is known by language students who have learned to name furniture: but for some, the word will cause difficulty in sentences like "He was appointed to the chair of maths at the university" or "He will chair the meeting". It is possible that the word "chair" in the students' language knowledge would not have these meanings. Students usually assume that they already know the meaning of an ordinary word, so they do not try to find another meaning for it. Therefore, the ability to use a dictionary should not be taken for granted in language classes.

Another important factor to consider is the students' unawareness of the information that a dictionary contains. A dictionary generally contains at least the following information about each word which can be used by the foreign language learners.

1. Its spelling
2. The standard pronunciation
3. Definitions to represent the word's one or more meanings
4. Parts of speech, such as noun, verb or preposition
5. Example sentence in which the word used
6. Synonym
7. Antonym

Other information may be included, such as the etymology or history of the word and whether the word is "non-standard" or "absolute". The history of a word is usually given at the beginning of the entry and often give information about the way the word has developed its current meaning. Placing a word's etymology before its definitions enables the reader to see where the first meaning of the word come from. Many people, however, want to know what the most common current meaning of a word is, and they expect to find that meaning given first. In recognition of this fact, some dictionaries now place the etymology at the end of each entry, after the definitions. A dictionary may be more than a reference book about a word; it can contain biographical and geographical knowledge as well as lists of weights, measures, symbols and so on.

Bilingual and monolingual dictionaries are the most used dictionaries by the foreign language learners. Students generally like to use bilingual dictionaries because they bring instant satisfaction, while teachers prefer monolinguals for their long term benefits. It is difficult to answer the question "which dictionary serves the learner best?" Bilingual dictionaries are generally employed in the initial stages of learning a language and may help the learner solve their terminological problems unless the unfamiliar word has numerous entries. Many bilingual dictionaries give only single word translations, as a result of which learners are bound to make mistakes. Koç and Bamber (1997:64) state that " as the meaning of a word tends to change according to the context in which it is used, the chances of getting the wrong meaning with this type of dictionary are fairly high." For instance, supposing the student has to look up

the Turkish adjective "verimli" in a Turkish –English bilingual dictionary he will be very likely to find these entries "productive", "profitable"etc. But these entries are not appropriate when it is intended to mean "prolific" (for the author) or "fertile" (for the soil) in a piece of text. Therefore, students should be aware of the disadvantages of using bilingual dictionaries. We can not prevent our learners from using bilingual dictionaries but we can advise them to use bilingual dictionaries wisely.

On the other hand, while using a monolingual dictionary users have to think in English and meanings have to be understood in terms of other English words. There is now a choice of good monolingual dictionaries available at various levels of difficulty and specially written for the foreign language learner.

Underhill (in Ison, 1985: 104) points out the following advantages of using the monolingual dictionaries.

1. Users have to think in English.
2. Meanings have to be understood in terms of other English words, promoting a more rapid expansion of passive vocabulary.
3. Many high-frequency function words which are virtually inaccessible via bilingual dictionary may be given appropriate treatment.
4. Learners may gain insights into the precision of defining and describing meanings, and constructing example sentences, as well as learning to cope with definitions which at first seem unclear.
5. The example sentences themselves not only exemplify typical usage but also provide an access to the meaning.
6. The ability to use the MLD effectively allows students the satisfaction of exploration through the dictionary, a sense of self-sufficiency and greater confidence in their ability to solve language problems for themselves. This in turn helps students to recognize and formulate their own language problems and questions in the first instance.

As Underhill points out above there are many advantages of using monolingual dictionaries in language learning. In addition to monolingual dictionaries , students can also make use of other dictionaries such as "The Dictionary of Idioms, The Dictionary of Collocations, The Dictionary of Synonyms and Antonyms" and the like. Students should be aware of the fact that dictionaries vary with respect to the number of words they include and the

amount of information they provide for each lexical item. The shorter the dictionary entry for the word is, the less trustworthy it will be.

In conclusion , it can be said that the benefits of dictionaries to language learners should not be ignored in language classes. Unfortunately, in most classrooms, very little time is provided for dictionary use. But it is an undeniable fact that a learner who makes good use of a dictionary will be able to continue learning outside the classroom and this will give him considerable autonomy about the decisions he makes about his own learning. In a teaching / learning situation, therefore, dictionary training should be an integral part of any syllabus.

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