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MAKING THE MOST OF DICTIONARIES IN THE CLASSROOM

Dictionaries are tools and rules of our everyday activities since they have got their rightful place. They turn out to be much more complicated and capable of many more uses than we suspect.

Students need encouragement and guidance in the use of dictionaries. Certainly there must be very few of those who come up through the grades these days who are familiar with the details of looking up words in dictionaries, but it is one thing to find a word in a dictionary and quite another to understand fully information there given about it.

Why should we encourage students to use dictionaries? Dictionaries develop learner's autonomy. They are a handy resource for researching different meanings, collocations, examples of use and standard pronunciation. If students know how to use them effectively, there are hundreds ofhours of self-guided study to be had with a good dictionary. The best way to complement a dictionary investment is strong study skill. As teachers we play an important role in developing these skills. That's why today we'll try to look at positive ways of turning any dictionary into a valuable learning classroom resource, referring different dictionaries.

A dictionary is a collection of words in a specific language, often listed alphabetically, with definitions etymologies, phonetics, pronunciations, and other information, or a book of words in one language with the equivalents in another, also known as a lexicon. A dictionary may be regarded as a lexicographical product that is characterized by three significant features:

1) it has been prepared for one or more functions;
2) it contains data that have been selected for the purpose of fulfilling those functions;
3) its lexicographic structures link and establish relationships between the data so that they can meet the needs of users and fulfill the functions of the dictionary

In many languages words can appear in many different forms, but only the undeclined or unconjugated form appears as the headword in most dictionaries. Dictionaries are most commonly found in the form of a book, but some newer dictionaries, like New Oxford American Dictionary and Star Dict are dictionary software running on PDAs or computers. There are also many online dictionaries accessible via the Internet.

A few more words about the importance of a dictionary as a valuable source of various information. How often do we need dictionaries?

Despite the fact that we all speak some languages more or less perfectly, a lot of information is associated with words and often we find ourselves unsure of some of it. The first question, then, is: what sort of information does a word contain. A word is basically an association of (1) linguistic sound and (2) meaning. Either we hear someone pronounce a sound that we associate with a meaning in our head or we have a meaning we wish to express and do so by creating linguistic sounds with our mouth. An important fundamental characteristic of language is that when we speak exchange meanings: meaning is all in our heads.

Fewer than 1,000 of the Earth's 6,800 languages and dialects-English among them-have writing systems. In these languages, a third component of information is associated in a word: (3) spelling, for spelling does not always easily correlate with the sound of a word. Look at the way

we spell *pair, pare,* and *pear*, all of which are pronounced the same. On the other hand, *lead* has two different pronunciations: /led/ and /leed. Dictionaries help us both with the spelling and pronunciation of such words.

Finally, we need to know the grammatical categories of words, the part of speech they belong to and more. For example, *lead* could be either one of two different words. One is a noun (the soft heavy metal); the other is a verb (the activity of showing someone the way). We need this information to know which word is in question. But we often need more grammatical information. We need to know the category of the verb. Some English verbs (the 'weak' verbs) are regular and use the suffix *-ed* to form the past tense: *zing* : *zing-ed*. Other verbs (the 'strong' verbs) are irregular: *sing* : *sang*. It is important for speakers of English and other languages to know which verbal category a verb belongs to in order to correctly use it. In order to provide the basic information we need to correctly use words, all dictionaries provide entries with these four basic components:

- spelling
- pronunciation
- part of speech (grammatical category)
- meaning

We can go to a dictionary for any of these pieces of information that may be temporarily or permanently missing from our own personal, mental lexicons, whether we are a speaker of a foreign language learning English or an English-language speaker unsure of one of these aspects of a vocabulary item.

Glossary - (root gloss means shiny brightness on a surface) a list of explanations of words, especially unusual ones, at the end of the book.

Thesaurus - a book of words that are put in groups together according to connections between their meanings rather than in an alphabetical list.

Dictionary - a book that gives a list of words in alphabetical order, with their meanings in the same or another language.

A few words about the first dictionaries in the world.

The oldest known dictionaries were Akkadian empire cueiform tablets with bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian wordlist, discovered in Ebla (modern Syria) and dated roughly 2300 BCE (before common era, used after a date to show that it is before the birth of Christ).

A Chinese dictionary 3d century BCE Erya was the first surviving monolingual dictionary

Arabic dictionaries were compiled between the 8th and 14th centuries CE, organizing words in rhyme order (by the last syllable)

The first European dictionaries were bilingual dictionaries. The earliest in the English language were glossaries of French, Italian or Latin words with definitions of the foreign words in English. An early non-alphabetical list of 8000 English words was the Elementarie created by Richard Mulcaster in 1592.

The first purely English alphabetical dictionary was A Table Alphabetical, written by English schoolteacher Robert Cawdrey in 1604. The only surviving copy is found at the Bodlein library in Oxford. Yet this early effort, as well as the many imitators which followed it, was seen unreliable and nowhere near definitive. Even some celebrities used to say "that it was sort of digrace to their nation that they had no...standard of their language, their dictionaries at that time were wordbooks, than dictionaries in the superior sense of that title"

It was not until Samuel Johnson's "A Dictionary of the English language (1755) that a truly noteworthy, reliable English Dictionary was seemed to have been produced, and the fact that today many people still mistakenly believe Johnson to have written the first English Dictionary is a testament to this legacy. By this stage, dictionaries had contained textual references for most words, and were arranged alphabetically, rather than by topic (a previously popular form arrangement, which meant all animals would be grouped together etc). Johnson's masterwork could be judged as the first to bring all these elements together, creating the first "modern" dictionary.

Johnson's Dictionary remained the English-language standard for over 150 years, until the Oxford University Press began writing and releasing the Oxford English Dictionary from 1884 onwards. It took nearly 50 years to finally complete the huge work, and they finally released the complete Oxford English Dictionary in twelve volumes in 1928. It remains the most comprehensive and trusted English language dictionary to this day, with revisions and updates added by a dedicated team every month.

Any conventional dictionary has become better and better during the many generations since the time the first dictionary was published.

Linguists and lexicographers have a matter with dictionaries. Every linguist with an interest in the quantitative properties of language will on some occasion be faced with some form of the ultimate question in the word numbers game: "How many words did Shakespeare use?", "How many words are there in the English language?" "How many words should a dictionary have?" The first question, at least, has a definite although not simple answer: Shakespeare's complete works consist of a total of 884647 words of text containing a grand total of 29066 different words including proper names. But on the question "How many words should a dictionary have" it is very difficult to answer. Every dictionary has a different number of words. On the contrary lexicographers have a task to record the meanings of words, the task of arranging these meanings in the order they think will be of most help to those who use their work. Different editors solve this problem of arrangement in different ways. There are problems with traditional dictionaries, though. Let's take a look at them and see what we can do to get around them.

There are still problems facing dictionary compilers. For example, words are listed in a dictionary in alphabetical order. But if a person does not know how to spell a word, how can they look it up? This is an intractable problem for traditional dictionaries but on-line dictionaries have a solution. Many on-line dictionaries allow you to write in just the letters you know and it will return all the words with those letters in the positions you specify. You may then select the word you need. For example, let's suppose you don't know the order of the "i" and the "e" in the word *receive*. Go to the dictionary search box on the top right of this page, type in "rec..ve" and see what happens.

You can also use this technique for writing poetry. Let's say you want a word that rhymes with *bottle*. Type in .ottle and see what you get. Of course, this method isn't perfect because sound and spelling do not perfectly correlate, but it may get you the word you want.

The problem facing traditional dictionaries in conveying the correct pronunciation of a word is that they lack the basic requisite: sound. To get around this shortcoming, dictionary compilers invent a standard alphabet that, unlike the real alphabet, is consistent. That is, in the consistent alphabet, "i" is always pronounced like the "i" in *bit, fit, quit* but not in *kite* or *vaccine*. Try Newbury House's dictionary by typing in *bicycle* and see if you can read the pronunciation symbols between slashes (/ . . ./).

Another problem with pronunciation is that there are often several different pronunciations of words. This is a particular problem in English, where great differences in pronunciation exist between US (with its Brooklyn, Southern, and other dialects), British, Australian, and other variants. How do you pronounce *aunt* or *either*. Even in the US, educated people pronounce these words differently. Ask someone to pronounce *interrupt* for you (show it to them written). Do you hear the first "t". The word is pronounced correctly with and without the first "t" and the final one is often dropped before certain consonants (e.g. *interrupt the teacher*). Capturing all these variations in one book is difficult; deciding which ones to omit is even more difficult.

The solution to the problem is audio files reproducing the actual pronunciation, now available to electronic dictionaries. The first dictionary to produce an audio solution to the pronunciation problem is the Encarta Dictionary, the newest entry in the dictionary race. The 4th edition of the American Heritage Dictionary, your Dictionary's choice for its Quick Lookup, now has this feature, available only on electronic dictionaries. All dictionaries still provide a symbol system for pronunciation: ours * Newbury House (IPA) * Cambridge

People most often look up words in dictionaries of their own language to get an accurate definition or the spelling of the word. Speakers of foreign languages need definitions in order to use the word properly. The meanings of some words are very close to the meanings of others. Native speakers often need to refer to a word's definition to distinguish it from the similar meaning of another word. For example, *contain* and *comprise* have very similar but not identical meanings. So, when should you use either word? The dictionary will tell you that *contain* simply means "to hold" while *comprise* means "to be made up of", i.e. to contain as constituent parts. Words also often have more than one meaning. *Run*, for example, generally means "to move fast on foot". However, that is not what we mean when we say "the water is running." *Run* can also mean "to flow (said of liquids)". Neither of these meanings apply to the use of *run* in "John runs a small bookstore." Here *run* means "to manage". Dictionaries usually list all the unrelated meanings, giving each a separate number. (You can confirm this by looking up *run* in any of the on-line dictionaries listed at the bottom of this page.)
- Do you serve crabs?
- Yes. Sit down we serve anyone.
- How is the boy who swallowed the dollar?
- No change yet.
So these are the basics of dictionaries and dictionary use. Dictionary and vocabulary aids do far more than help us with spelling and the meaning of words. As we use these important resources more, we will discover even more capacities they have for explaining our conceptual space.
We should not neglect dictionary work. Like pronunciation, it is a natural part of any course that needs to have an appropriate focus and allocation of time. What dictionary to use depends on your aim.
By encouraging the intelligent and self-guided use of dictionaries, learners become more independent, and as teachers this is one of our core goals.

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