

## Using Dictionaries

by Scott Thornbury

from 'How to Teach Vocabulary', Pearson Education 2002.

Dictionaries – as we have seen – can be used as a last resort when 'guessing from context' strategies fail. But they can also be used productively, both for generating text and as resources for vocabulary acquisition. Their usefulness depends on learners being able to access the information they contain both speedily and accurately. Training learners in effective dictionary use is particularly important since many learners may not be familiar with dictionary conventions, even in their own language. Such training also provides them with the means to continue vocabulary acquisition long after their course of formal study has been completed.

Key skills involved in effective dictionary use are the following:

- Recognising features of dictionary layout, such as use of alphabetical order, headwords, grammar and pronunciation information, definitions, etc.
- Understanding the way dictionary entries are coded – particularly the use of abbreviations such as *adj* (adjective), *sth* (something), *ScotE* (Scottish English), etc.
- Discriminating between the different meanings of a word, especially a word with many polysemes (see page 8) such as *course or fair*, or words that are homonyms such as *bill, bat* and *shed* or homographs such as *windy, live* and *lead* (see page 8).
- Cross-checking (when using a bilingual dictionary) that the translation equivalent that is offered is the best choice for the meaning that is required. For example, a French learner wishing to express *embrasser* (as in *je t'embrasse*) in English may find several different equivalents in their dictionary: 1 *embrace*. 2 *hug*. 3 *kiss*. 4 *include*. Only by checking 'backwards' (e.g. by looking up the entry for *kiss*) will they discover that some of the English words may have a more restricted meaning and may not be appropriate for their purpose.
- Using synonyms, antonyms and other information to narrow the choice of best word for the meaning intended. For example, a learner wanting to convey the meaning *carefree* but knowing only *careless* could use this as the starting point in a dictionary search. Similarly, the learner who wants to correct the sentence '*They told everyone their engaged*' will find both the noun *engagement* and the correct verb *announced* under the entries alongside *engaged* in any good learners' dictionary. Or a learner wondering if *steed* substitutes for *horse* will find that it has poetic connotations and is generally only used in a literary context.
- Inferring the spelling of an unfamiliar word from only having heard it, in order to check its meaning in the dictionary.

Ways of training learners in the above skills include the following:

Direct attention to the dictionary's layout information, as displayed in a typical entry. Such example entries can usually be found in the introductory matter at the front of the dictionary. You could prepare a wallchart or overhead transparency that displays this information. Then prepare a quiz that learners can answer in groups, using their dictionaries. The words should be obscure because, if the learners already know the words, there would be no incentive to use their dictionaries. For example:

- 1 Which one in each of the following lists are not English words?  
*a terrapin b termagant c terkle d tern*  
*a wede b wedlock c weenie d wedge*  
*a caterpillar b cattery c catism d caterwaul*
- 2 What part of speech are  
*a gaggle b parch c barring d peaky ?*
- 3 What is the past tense of  
*a abide b rend c rid d strive ?*
- 4 Find the words from which these words are derived:  
*a shies b racily c begotten d gravelly*
- 5 What preposition usually follows each of these words?  
*a believe b ashamed c opposed d consist*
- 6 In terms of pronunciation, which is the odd one out in each group?  
*a incise b concise c precise*  
*a death b breath c sheath*  
*a rude b feud c lewd*
- 7 What is the American equivalent of  
*a dinner jacket*  
*b pavement artist*  
*c holiday maker*  
*d spare tyre*

Design a similar set of activities based on just one page of a learners' dictionary.

Set learners the task of identifying which of different headwords matches a given meaning. A headword is any word which has an entry of its own. In the case of homonyms and homographs, most dictionaries give separate entries, and number the headwords accordingly. Thus:

spar<sup>1</sup> to practise boxing with someone  
 spar<sup>2</sup> a thick pole, especially one on a ship to support sails or ropes

(adapted from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*)

Here is an exercise aimed at sensitising learners to this dictionary feature:

Set similar tasks that require learners to discriminate between the different meanings (or polysemes) under one headword, or the different phrasal verbs associated with one headword (e.g. *get up, get on, get over*).

With groups of students speaking the same mother tongue and using bilingual dictionaries, set translation tasks involving words with multiple meanings in both the L1 and L2. Encourage them to cross-check the words to ensure that the translation matches the meaning required by the context. English words which could be targeted in such exercises because their translation is problematic include: *country, to meet, way, to spend, to stay, to stand, to get, trip, home, fun, to join, mind*, and virtually all common prepositions.

Set learners the task of devising word chains using dictionary entries. Different pairs can be given a starting word, and then ten minutes to produce as long a chain as possible, choosing only words that are related in some meaningful way with the immediately preceding word. They can then explain their word chains to other pairs. Here, for example, is a word chain that started from the word *horrid* in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*:

horrid > unpleasant > (not) enjoyable > pleasure > happiness > feelings > anger > offensive > insulting > rude > annoy > unhappy > worried > anxious

Encourage dictionary use when learners are self-correcting their written work. Indicate, for example, where a mistake is due to the wrong spelling (*wich* for *which*), the wrong choice of word (*nervous* for *angry*), or the wrong form of the word chosen (*argues* for *arguments*). As preparation, distribute examples of vocabulary errors collected from homework, and ask learners to work in pairs or small groups, using dictionaries, to correct them.

Encourage learners to guess the spelling of unknown words that occur when they are listening to a recorded cassette, for example. Pause the cassette after words known to be unfamiliar, and allow learners time to work in pairs to work out the spelling. They may then check the spelling in the dictionary, looking up the meaning at the same time.

It was pointed out that the first line of attack on meeting unfamiliar words in a text is to use 'guessing from context' strategies and that dictionaries should only be consulted as a last resort. If learners are shortcutting the guessing stage, one way of reducing their dependence on dictionaries is the following:

Hand out a text that has a number of words in it that you expect will be unfamiliar to learners. Ask them individually to choose just five words that they are allowed to look up. Before handing out dictionaries, ask them to compare and revise their 'shortlists' in pairs. If one student thinks they know a word on their partner's list (through having worked it out from context, for example) they can explain it to them and delete that word from their list. They continue in the same way in successively larger groups, before submitting the words to a class vote. Only when the class agrees on a definitive short-list of five words can the dictionaries be consulted. In this way, learners can negotiate which words are most important for an understanding of the text, and which cannot be deduced from context. The activity also requires learners to make repeated decisions about words, which – as we have seen – is an aid to memorisation.