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The Teaching of Dictionary Use to Multilingual Groups: Traditional (Print) versus Online Dictionaries

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Abstract

Research into dictionary use has demonstrated that students from various national settings differ in the amount of user training they receive. Teachers who work with multilingual groups can try to mitigate the negative effects of this lack of training, but such an endeavor presupposes knowing exactly what skills are needed to handle a dictionary and whether the skills required for traditional print dictionaries differ from those necessary when students avail themselves of dictionaries available online.

Keywords: print and online dictionaries, multilingual groups, user training

Introduction

Research confirms some students within multilingual groups may display dictionary behavior distinct from that observed in other group members. A good case in point is the time needed to complete a dictionary-related task resulting from various 'cultural attitudes to task completion' (Nesi, 1994, p. 583). Some may also be more successful in retrieving the information dictionaries contain, a finding produced by Meara and English, who note that 'a particular dictionary can vary in its effectiveness for different target language groups' (Meara, English, 1987, p. 8) and, earlier, Ard (1982, p. 2), who observed that '[s]tudents from languages "close" to English' are less likely to err when integrating the information found in a dictionary into their own compositions.

Another important finding concerns the amount of user training that students with various linguistic backgrounds receive. As demonstrated by e.g. Atkins and Knowles (1990, p. 384), 79.2% of the French pupils they surveyed never received instruction in dictionary use – a result followed by 70.7% reported by the Austrians and the Spanish, 46.0% reported by the Italians and 37.8% for students representing Switzerland. Such data contrast sharply with those obtained for the German students who participated in this research project, as only 4.5% among them claimed that they have never been taught how to use a dictionary.

While the factors reported at the beginning may be difficult to change, the problem of insufficient reference skills *can* be tackled within the class one will be asked to teach. A teacher, who noticed that his or her students do not necessarily use their dictionaries 'in the way their compilers intended them to be' (Béjoint, 1989, p. 208), can mitigate the negative effects of such a state of affairs. This in itself is not a new postulate – as Béjoint points out, the 'need for a specific pedagogy of dictionary use has been stressed by several authors, in many countries, for different populations of users'. At the same time, as he continues to claim, 'some studies have shown that many teachers are indifferent to dictionaries'. Since this is often attributed to teachers' lack of knowledge concerning either the general or the more specific objectives they should follow in order to transform a student into a more skilled dictionary user, I briefly review the principles one is recommended to apply, concentrating primarily on those that have been established at times when electronic dictionaries were unavailable, as it seems that most of them are still valid.

Skills needed to retrieve the information dictionaries contain

As rightly observed by Hartmann (2001, p. 90), consulting a dictionary presupposes a realization on the part of a student 'that there is a problem arising from the activity in which he or she is engaged (e.g. reading, writing or translating)'. Since many students find it difficult to spot the problem areas, a revision of the major error types that can surface up when one is engaged in a specific activity, paired with some rudimentary training in 'the communicative functions dictionaries are intended to fulfill' (Bergenholtz, Tarp, 1995, p. 22) may be necessary. By and large, a student who has undergone preliminary training of this kind should have a clear view of information categories that s/he will need while on a specific activity, e.g. that in, say, translation from the native into a foreign language some information needed to complete the task will include the translation equivalent, information on the degree of equivalence, its orthography, gender, irregularity, collocations or usage (Bergenholtz, Tarp, 1995, p. 24). Next, s/he will need to have a clear view of which dictionaries to turn to for the information needed.

Once a user has realized that the problem s/he has come across can be solved by consulting a dictionary, a subsequent failure to produce the desired result may, as Hartmann (2001, p. 90–91) explains, mean that s/he has not been able to:

(1) select the appropriate dictionary from among those available;

(2) find that item needed in the dictionary s/he has reached for;

(3) find the information needed within the dictionary entry;

(4) integrate the information extracted 'into the text that prompted the reference process in the first place' (Hartmann, 2001, p. 91).

The ability to select the appropriate dictionary presupposes knowing what dictionary types exist. It is assumed that the teaching of this (and, indeed, of any

other dictionary skill) 'should be spread over the whole period of language teaching as much as possible, rather than concentrated in a few classes and forgotten afterwards' (Béjoint, 1989, p. 211). In many cases, acting on this very postulate may require cooperation among all teachers who will be working with a specific group and this is what makes the task even more difficult to implement. A team of teachers who would decide that the whole enterprise is worthy of their time and effort would have to first analyze the group's reference needs and – should they decide they want this group to be able to use a certain dictionary type by the end of the entire teaching period – say, four semesters, each taught by one of them – think about how to divide the teaching of skills necessary to handle this very dictionary among themselves.

As they proceed, teachers should remember that their aim is not to wean students away from dictionaries they may have got accustomed to. A student who has been using a small bilingual dictionary for the past few years may find it difficult to suddenly start to use one s/he has never seen before. What is more, if using this dictionary does not negatively affect his or her performance, s/he may not understand why the teacher wants him or her to stop using it. Accordingly, teachers should rather concentrate on showing the students how certain dictionary types 'complement one another' (Béjoint, 1989, p. 210), e.g. how the dictionary just introduced can help where their old ones fail. Importantly, too, teachers will have to remember that 'in some languages, the number of dictionaries to choose from is extremely limited' (Béjoint, 1989, p. 210) which means that some students may need more time to get accustomed to a dictionary type (e.g. a conceptual dictionary) they have not come across before.

Finally, though students are typically told to choose their dictionaries 'according to the type of lexical item and to the type of information needed' (Béjoint, 1989, p. 210), their quality should not be neglected either. Over three decades ago Hausmann (1986, p. 109) reminded us about what I consider probably the most important dictionary skill: the ability to 'tell the difference between a superior and an inferior dictionary.' This skill seems particularly valid today, i.e. at times when 'the trend for using electronic [and online] dictionaries among students is […] increasing' (Boonmoh, 2010, p. 57) and when, simultaneously, we observe a tendency on our students' part to polarize the lexicographic offer into superior/inferior and positive/negative, the superior and the positive standing, of course, for dictionaries offered online. While I do agree that convenience, speed of reference as well as some functions only online dictionaries possess are very welcome design features, one must not forget that, as Lew (2013, p. 18–19) points out, many online and electronic dictionaries 'push poor and/or out-of-date content' and this fact should also be taken into account when teachers try to transform their students into more informed dictionary users.

When students understand how to select the right dictionary, they will next need to be taught that from the moment a specific reference work has been de-

cided on, success (or lack of it)depends on their ability to find the item needed. As demonstrated by Nesi (2002), who examined dictionary use by individuals from Asia, the EU, South America, South Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East and the USA studying in the medium of English, students may experience difficulties while trying to find the entries needed in the traditional (book format) dictionaries, e.g. because they fail to predict that some of the multi-word units they want to look up had been granted the status of separate entries (Nesi, 2002, p. 283). Problems such as this one, as well as difficulties students may face while searching the entry contents (one of the errors Nesi reports on the same page consisted in selecting 'the first meaning provided for the headword, rather than a more appropriate definition listed later in the entry') call for remedial work during which the students' awareness of the dictionaries' overall structure (i.e. the component parts they consist of), and the structure of a dictionary entry will be enhanced.

A word of caution may be in order at this point concerning the specialist terminology dictionary researchers and dictionary compilers use in order to talk about dictionary parts and the elements that facilitate locating individual components of the dictionary entry. The literature on user training generally advises against introducing ordinary users into 'into the intricacies of dictionary making' (Béjoint, 1998, p. 209) and this principle also applies to learned, specialist jargon specific for the domain in question. Terms such as 'access structure', that Louw (1999, p. 108) defines as 'the primary guide structure in the central texts of any standard […] dictionary' or 'inner access structure' (i.e. any design feature that can help the user to reach the information categories dictionary articles contain) are not necessary. While deciding on which of these terms to introduce and which to paraphrase, one may as well check the contents of the user's guides of dictionaries students will be recommended. If the guide trusts the prospective users with terms such as a 'thumb index', the 'running heads' (words that, as Louw (1999, p. 110) explains, 'indicate the first and last lemmata to be found on each page'), 'headword' or 'entry', there is no reason to keep them away from the students. When we consider that teachers should actually encourage their students to read the guides of the dictionaries they will be consulting, we notice that a few terminological units will have to be absorbed anyway.

Needless to say, if the students are using electronic or online dictionaries, some of the skills that were needed in order to find the look up item in a print dictionary will become obsolete. To exemplify, if the unknown, 'problem' word is a derivative (e.g. *murkier*), all a user needs to do to find it in one of the dictionaries available online is to write 'murkier definition' in the Google search slot and not, as before, reduce it to the 'canonical' form, *murky*. However, as stressed on numerous occasions (see e.g. Boonmoh, 2010; Koren, 1997; Nesi,2000; Sanchez Ramos, 2005), using online/electronic dictionaries is by no

means an operation during which all tasks users of print dictionaries had to perform will now be completed by the computer. To benefit from them, a number of skills will also be needed, though these will be '*different* skills than those [required of] users of dictionaries in book format' (Boonmoh, 2010, p. 57; emphasis added). If no training in their use is provided, students will not be able to successfully extract all the information they provide (Winkler, 2001), precisely as before, when only print reference works were available.

Conclusion

When a dictionary user reaches for a dictionary of his or her choice, s/he naturally wishes to find the information needed in the first place in which s/he looked for it. This, as all practicing teachers would agree, is not always the case. Research into dictionary use has proved that this phenomenon has its source both in a growing complexity of dictionaries and – on the other hand – in the user's low awareness of existing dictionary types, their contents and structure. Studies into the effectiveness of user training (for an overview, see Lew, Galas, 2008) have demonstrated that the introduction of a dictionary skill component into a class does help to a significant extent. Teachers who work with multilingual, multinational groups consisting of individuals who will come to class with different previous histories of learning a foreign language, different experiences in dictionary use and varying amounts of dictionary skills can either ignore or address this problem. Should they decide to take responsibility for transforming their students into skilled dictionary users, studies such as those reported above will help them determine what to teach and how to teach it, in a manner more comprehensive than it has been possible within the limited confines of the present study.

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