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Title            Should they look it up? The role of dictionaries in language learning  
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Source          *REACT*, 2001(1), 27-33  
Published by    National Institute of Education (Singapore)

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# **SHOULD THEY LOOK IT UP? THE ROLE OF DICTIONARIES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

**Review by Wang Dakun**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A dictionary is among the first things a foreign language learner purchases and most language teachers believe that dictionaries can assist the learning of vocabulary (Scholfield, 1997). Dictionaries give information on word derivation, meaning, spelling and pronunciation. A good dictionary carries additional information about grammar and usage, synonyms and derivations, as well as distinctions between spoken and written English.

However, many educators and researchers discourage the use of dictionaries. The idea that words can be learned through dictionaries, they say, may not be linguistically sound. Honeyfield (1977: 36), for example, is sceptical of the value of dictionaries. He says that trying to learn a new word by looking it up in a dictionary is a form of rote learning, and that it may be more beneficial for learners to refrain from using dictionaries and be forced to infer word meanings from context. Nor is Honeyfield alone. Nation (1990) advises students to guess at word meanings and to use the dictionary only as a last resort. Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984) similarly discourage the use of dictionaries in language classrooms. They believe that apart from providing

students with lists of synonyms, dictionaries do not help students fit words appropriately into situational contexts. Learners, they say, can become too dependent on dictionaries and fail to develop their own self-confidence and guessing ability.

The primary concern is that looking up words frequently can interfere with short-term memory and disrupt the comprehension process because it slows reading speed and binds readers to the sentence level, and this interferes with global comprehension. Dictionary use, critics say, not only detracts from the enjoyment of reading, but also disrupts the train of thought. Another issue debated among language teachers and lexicographers is whether some dictionaries are better than others. Are monolingual or bilingual dictionaries more useful for language learners? What kind of dictionary, if any, should we recommend to our students? Do dictionaries assist or interfere with reading and language learning? This article reviews research into the effects of dictionary use on comprehension and vocabulary learning and suggests some implications for second language learning and teaching.

## **REVIEW OF RESEARCH**

### ***Dictionary use and reading comprehension***

Most of the research around dictionaries has focused on reading comprehension. Bensoussan *et al.* (1984) wanted to see if dictionary use improved the reading comprehension of advanced EFL students in Israel. Two groups of students read texts using either monolingual or bilingual dictionaries. A third group had no dictionary access. The dictionary user group was asked to underline the words they looked up while reading. Then, with the text still in front of them, all answered multiple-choice questions designed to check reading comprehension. Surprisingly, dictionary use had no significant effect on reading comprehension. Even more surprising was the discovery that dictionary use had no effect on reading speed. This has aroused a lot of interest among researchers.

In a more recent experiment, Knight (1994) investigated the effect of on-line dictionary access on vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension in Spanish. Students were stratified according to their American College Test verbal scores and were randomly placed in two groups, half having access to an on-line dictionary and the other half having no dictionary access. The students were asked to read two short articles in Spanish via computers. Any words looked up by the dictionary group were electronically recorded without their knowledge. After reading, the students were asked to write down in English everything they could remember, and then given two vocabulary tests:

providing an English equivalent to a Spanish word, and selecting a definition from five alternatives. The same tests were re-administered as a post-test two weeks later to test long-term retention. The results clearly showed that the dictionary-using group outperformed the no-dictionary group both in reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition.

Contrary to the earlier findings of Bensoussan *et al.* (1984), Knight's results suggest that dictionary lookup does not disrupt short-term memory, but rather enhances comprehension. He also found that low verbal ability students are more dependent on vocabulary knowledge in reading than high verbal ability students seem to be. For this reason, he claims, weaker students are disadvantaged if told to simply guess meaning from context and might benefit more from dictionary use than high proficiency students, who can make better use of contextual guessing.

However, conclusions about the value of dictionary use depend to some extent on the nature of the reading material used. Stahl (1983) and others, for example, have noted that some texts contain more context information about difficult or targeted words than others - e.g. definitions or examples - much like dictionaries. We can probably safely conclude that students will learn more new word meanings if they can both see the words in context *and also* have access to a dictionary.

### ***Dictionary use and vocabulary learning***

Relatively few studies have focused

centrally on vocabulary learning through dictionaries. The most likely reason is that language practitioners agree that words should not be learnt or taught in isolation, and dictionaries are seen as reinforcing students' tendency to learn individual words (Honeyfield, 1977), so this aspect of language learning has not received the research attention it deserves.

Summers (1988) explored the relationship between dictionary use and vocabulary learning in a series of experiments in which the subjects were assigned randomly to four groups. Three groups had access to one of three different types of dictionary entry types: definition only, example only, and definition plus example. The fourth group received no dictionary assistance. The experiment found that in all cases, comprehension was substantially improved when a dictionary entry of any type accompanied the text. The third experiment, which tested the value of the three different definition techniques, showed that the mix of definition plus example was the most successful for production purposes. Summers concluded that "all three types of dictionary entry substantially improved students performance" (p. 123), but that dictionary use aided comprehension more than production. According to Summers, the dictionary, though not always a perfect tool, is "a useful one, with which to gain further understanding of the range of use of new language, leading eventually to accurate production, mainly in writing" (p. 123).

In a study by Luppescu and Day (1993), Japanese EFL university students were asked to read a short story in class. Half the students read with access to a

bilingual dictionary of their own choice; the rest were not permitted to use dictionaries. Immediately after reading, the students were given a surprise vocabulary test. The dictionary-users' scores were, on average, about 50% higher than the non-users' scores. However, there were two trade-offs: the use of dictionaries slowed reading speed, and learners tended to be confused when headwords in the dictionary were followed by multiple entries.

Fraser (1999) focussed on the strategies ESL students said they preferred to use when they met unfamiliar words while reading, and how successful these strategies were for vocabulary learning. Self-reflective data was gathered from eight students who read eight texts over a five-month period. A week after completing each reading, the students did a recall task to measure their learning of the self-identified unfamiliar words. The results showed that when participants either only consulted, or only inferred word meanings, they recalled around 30% of the words. However, when they first inferred meanings *and then* consulted, their recall increased to 50%.

Several recent survey studies (Gu & Johnson, 1996; Kojic-Sabo & Lightbown, 1999; Schmitt, 1997) all reinforce the importance of dictionary use in vocabulary learning. In Schmitt's (1997) study, Japanese EFL learners reported "use of a bilingual dictionary" as one of their most useful strategies, and that they used bilingual dictionaries most frequently. The studies by Gu and Johnson (1996) and Kojic-Sabo and Lightbown (1999) all demonstrate that learners' vocabulary knowledge and their overall language proficiency are, among other

factors, much related to their dictionary use.

All these results highlight the value of dictionary consultation as an explicit vocabulary-learning strategy, particularly when used to verify an inference, suggesting that dictionary use should have a more important role in second language reading classes.

### ***What kinds of dictionaries are best?***

Traditionally, monolingual dictionaries have been preferred because bilingual dictionaries are thought to tie learners down to a perpetual exercise in translation, which might inhibit their ability to express in the target foreign language (Hartmann, 1991; Sinclair, 1987).

Others believe dictionaries of both types can be useful, but for different reasons (Piotrowski, 1989; Hartmann, 1991). The advantage bilingual dictionaries have is that learners can make use of both their first and second linguistic knowledge to decode word meaning. A well-chosen equivalent explanation can transit, in a single gloss, the part of meaning shared by the L1 word and the L2 item, with little effort expended by the learner. Monolingual dictionaries, on the other hand, describe meaning in a more analytical way, giving synonyms and associations as well as parts of speech, derivations and usage, etc. The problem with monolingual dictionaries for foreign language learners is the unavoidable inherent circularity of the entries.

When the “feel” of the foreign word is well conveyed, bilingual dictionaries can be more vivid than monolingual ones for learners, but a common weakness is that

these dictionaries often give only sketchy information about items, and some fear that prolonged use of bilingual dictionaries could perhaps retard second-language acquisition (Bensoyussan et al., 1984). By the same argument, monolingual dictionaries are believed to boost language acquisition because they stimulate thinking in the foreign language.

However, these claims are based on assumptions about language, language acquisition and language use, and little empirical work has been done to bear out these views. Thus it is not possible to offer conclusive arguments for or against monolingual or bilingual dictionaries. Rather, learners should not stick to one type of dictionary but see the two types as complementary, serving different purposes. Monolingual dictionaries are more useful for checking correct English use of a word; bilingual dictionaries can show a learner how to say something in English at all.

## **CONCLUSION**

Based on the above empirical studies, it can be reasonably concluded that dictionaries, whether monolingual or bilingual, play an important role in language learning. Dictionary-users in research studies all tend to show a clear advantage over non-users in the number of words learnt. It would seem that for EFL/ESL learners wanting to form a well-rounded concept of a word meaning, the dictionary is probably the most convenient and reliable crutch they can employ, because unlike first language learners, they do not have access to the “many excellent human dictionaries in the form of parents and teachers, who

are frequently asked to give explanations for new words to children" (Summers, 1988: 113).

While dictionaries give low verbal ability learners a special advantage, it cannot be assumed that high proficiency students will use a dictionary less than low proficiency students (Knight, 1994). In fact, the reverse is probably true. In Knight's study, high verbal ability students looked up around 20% more words than lower ability students. High proficiency students tend to look up a word even if they have successfully guessed its meaning (Hulstijn, 1993; Knight, 1994). These studies suggest that while dictionaries can give weaker learners much needed linguistic knowledge, they help high proficiency learners to gain confidence during reading. Studies have led researchers to conclude that, whether for comprehension or vocabulary learning, an approach that combines dictionary use with contextual guessing is more effective than either single method in isolation.

Whether teachers pay much attention or not, many learners use dictionaries substantially. In fact, one trait that characterises good learners is their clear awareness of what they can learn from a dictionary about new words, particularly collocation and spelling. Dictionaries and their use deserve more attention, both from teachers in the classroom and from researchers in SLA and applied linguistics.

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# **DICTIONARIES IN LANGUAGE LEARNING**

## **IMPLICATIONS**

### ***1. The results of research in this area present strong evidence in support of the following views:***

- Learners stand a better chance of remembering a word when they refer a dictionary as opposed to just wild guessing.
- Learners' vocabulary knowledge and their overall language proficiency are much related to their dictionary use.
- Successful language learners have a clear awareness of what they can learn about new words and tend to use dictionaries more efficiently than weak learners.
- Dictionaries help learners gain confidence and become independent learners.

### ***2. The following implications can be drawn up for ESL instruction:***

- Students, especially the weaker ones, need to be taught how to consult a dictionary and how to sift the information in dictionary entries. Scholfield (1997) provides some useful exercises for helping to familiarize students with the dictionary.
- Students need to be shown how to process the information they find in a dictionary, e.g. how best to categorize and store the information for future use (alphabetically, by function, by topic, by date or by synonyms); how to take down phrases or example sentences containing the words; and how to test each other on what they have learnt, or set self-tests.
- Students need practice in inferencing and deducing meaning from context and other visual clues.

### ***3. Two caveats should be heeded in relation to dictionary use:***

- If it is to be learned, vocabulary picked up through dictionary consulting must be reinforced in daily communication, through writing and extensive reading.
- Students should be warned of unthinking dependence on dictionaries. They need to know that a dictionary is best used as a last resort after sensible guesswork has failed. One of the most useful dictionary skills is to know when not to use a dictionary.