TOWARDS A DICTIONARY-ORIENTED ENGLISH LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract: *The present paper foregrounds the idea that dictionaries still play a pivotal role in the process of foreign language acquisition by enabling English language students to gain invaluable insights into the mechanics of the linguistic fabric, i.e. the way vocabulary, grammar, and phonetics inextricably intertwine.*

No doubt that a dictionary-oriented English learning process involves students' well-thought-out and consistent training in dictionary literacy. Likewise, we are of the opinion that learners can genuinely enhance their English skills once they integrate these authoritative, reliable reference tools into their study routine, given that dictionaries do symbolize the relentless quest for knowledge alongside an intellectual curiosity to unravel language mysteries.

Keywords: *dictionary skills; long-term vocabulary retention; language acquisition*

1. Premises

Dictionaries capture the lively spirit of a language, rendering the linguistic endeavour considerably more meaningful, enjoyable, and likely to yield long-lasting results.

To our mind, English language learners mustn't limit dictionaries to a sporadic use, solely when attempting to rapidly unravel a linguistic mystery. Should language learners choose to capitalize on their *linguistic curiosity*, forging a path through a plethora of lexical items, phonetic insights and grammar rules, dictionaries won't unlock word meanings only, but they will lend the process of language learning a whole new perspective, thus prompting students to consider English acquisition from a rather more sequential and less ambiguous standpoint.

Weighing all the above up, our firm belief is that English language students are going to be greatly benefited by developing *dictionary skills*.

2. *How Could English Language Teachers Raise Students' Awareness of Dictionary Use?*

Probably, by devising *dictionary literacy* modules, intended to enable language learners to acquire complex study skills such as making a clear distinction between necessary *decoding* lexicographical tools and useful *encoding* lexicographical ones, new vocabulary retention through a deep understanding of countless example sentences, a more nuanced selection of words, a detail-oriented approach, syntax analysis, information breakdown, sustained efforts to master *the nuts and bolts* of grammar patterns as well as a wider perspective on how inextricably intertwined the lexical and grammatical layers of language's rich tapestry truly are.

Furthermore, we believe that, if dictionary-based exercises were to become an integral part of English language classes, teachers could ensure that language learners grow intellectually curious and broaden their linguistic skills in order to sail through complex exercises, testing them on the use of synonyms, antonyms, collocations, idioms, and phrasal verbs.

To meet such criteria, we argue that introductory lexicographical notions might be brought to the fore, with English language learners being taught how to work with specific notions like *bilingual dictionary, bilingualised dictionary, collocate, context, co-text, to decode, to encode, idiom, L1, L2, learner's dictionary*[1]*, etc.*

[1] Philippe Humblé, *Dictionaries and Language Learners*, (2001), pp. 166-168: "*Bilingualised dictionary*. A bilingualised dictionary is a kind of pedagogical dictionary. It necessarily includes information in two languages without being a bilingual dictionary in the traditional sense of the word. Often bilingualised dictionaries are a partial or total translation of a monolingual learner's dictionary. In some cases, the definition of a word in a foreign language is given in the foreign language and a translation in the language of the learner is added. (…) *Collocate*. A *collocate* is a word which occurs very frequently with another word so that the chance of both occurring together is very high. *Co-text* is the immediate linguistic surroundings of a lexical item. Often this *co-text* will indicate a nine-word span, four words on each side of the word under consideration. *Decode*. To *decode* is to translate from an L2, target language or foreign language, into an L1, source language, usually the mother tongue. *Decoding* is (…) the process of understanding a (usually)

3. A Diachronic Perspective on Dictionaries

If we were to make an excursion into the way dictionaries, generally speaking, and English ones, in particular, came into being, we would emphasise first and foremost the lengthy and gruelling process of collecting information as well as sifting through countless notes to successfully lay the foundation of landmark lexicographical works, which still capture people's attention at present: "The very earliest dictionaries of English were actually *glossaries* that translated Latin words into Old English, the form of English spoken before about 1100 AD. The *monolingual* dictionary (…) didn't appear until 1600 - so Shakespeare did much of his work without even the possibility of looking anything up. For the first century or so, these dictionaries only defined 'hard words'. It wasn't until the 18th century that dictionaries grew and included most meanings of common, everyday words; during that century most of the features we associate with dictionaries first appeared, such as *pronunciations*, *etymologies*, and *parts of speech*. In the nineteenth century, dictionaries of English began to attempt to cover the whole vocabulary of the language and in the twentieth century, they became still more inclusive, covering types of language that had not previously been considered appropriate, for example *slang*, regional words, or technical *jargon*." ('How Have Dictionaries Changed Over the Years?)

Research highlights the pivotal role that Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* published in 1755, alongside several other dictionaries, played in English lexicography:

'Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language,* published in 1755, defined a paltry 40,000 words. The original O.E.D., proposed by the Philological Society of London in 1857 and completed more than 70 years later, contained over 400,000 entries. The Merriam-Webster universe is a direct descendant of Noah Webster's *American Dictionary of the English Language,* published in 1828. Compiled by Webster alone over the course of more than 20 years, it contained 70,000 words, nearly a fifth of which had never been defined before.' (del Valle, 2021)

Likewise, Philippe Humblé (2001) underlines the relevance of Johnson's dictionary to the entire linguistic landscape: "Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language* in 1755. Although Johnson's dictionary was a private undertaking, it had a similar goal as its French and Italian predecessors: standardising. To standardise means to unify. Johnson wanted to protect the English language from 'corruption'." (Humblé, 2001: 32)

4. Dictionaries in Language Teaching

As the British linguist, David Wilkins, put it, 'Without grammar, very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed.'[2] On this note, we highlight that, if English language learners are wondering what path to follow in order to get irrefutable results throughout their language learning process, then *dictionaries* can't be omitted, once acknowledged how instrumental they are in bolstering English language students' performance. ('Are Dictionaries Still Useful in Language Teaching Today?', 2024; Ridley, 2016: 'Why Are Dictionaries Important?'; Barbara Ann Kipfer, 2015: '9 Reasons Why Print Dictionaries Are Better Than Online Dictionaries')

When considering various strategies, designed to help English language learners to expand their vocabulary, we notice that building blocks like *reading extensively*, *keeping a vocabulary journal*, *using both a dictionary and a thesaurus, listening to podcasts* are, indeed, given a careful

written text in a language which is not the *decoder's* L1. It is a commonly used term in lexicography and does not imply any specific linguistic theory on language as a code. It does not mean that when somebody reads or hears another language, they are *decoding*. One is only *decoding* when one does not spontaneously understand the word in the L2 and has to look it up or go in search of some kind of linguistic information in order to understand the message. *Encode*. To *encode* is to translate from an L1 into an L2. *Encoding* is the process of producing a text, written or spoken, in a language that is not the *encoder's* L1. This does not mean that when somebody speaks or writes another language, they are *encoding*. One is only *encoding* when one does not spontaneously know the word in the L2 and has to look it up or go in search of some kind of linguistic information to be able to do so. *Idiom* (traditional definition). A group of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from the meanings of the constituent words, as for example *(It was raining) cats and dogs (Collins English Dictionary).*"

[2] https://www.clozemaster.com/blog/vocabulary-key-to-fluency/: *'Four Reasons Learning Lots of Vocabulary Is the Key to Fluency'* by Jonathan Jenkins, retrieved November 15th, 2021

consideration. Besides, English language learners should always bear in mind that *practice makes perfect*. ('10 Ways to Build a Strong Vocabulary', 2023)

Developing *dictionary skills* among English language students may be a lengthy, multi-fold process throughout which steps like 'checking the right form of a word; finding out how to use a word in a sentence; exploring when it's appropriate to use a particular word or not' as well as checking 'if other words might be better used instead' are being thoroughly explained. Furthermore, when learners are intent on enhancing their *dictionary skills*, spelling and pronunciation performance is also likely to greatly improve. ('Are Dictionaries Still Useful in Language Teaching Today?', 2024; 'Academic Writing in English. General Information on Dictionary Use', 2020)

Seemingly, dictionaries come across as enduring language learning tools that can defy the current challenges in order to keep pace with the changes on the market. If *at a loss for* words, language students are encouraged to discover why *learner's dictionaries* are among the most helpful lexicographical tools for English language enthusiasts. ('Are Dictionaries Still Useful in Language Teaching Today?, 2024)

5. CD-ROM Dictionaries, Remnants of the Past?

We take the view that these CD-ROM dictionaries, though not a recent product on the lexicographical market, aren't deemed to have become obsolete.

By way of illustration, the CD-ROM edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* presents English language students with the component of *activities*, designed in such a manner as to cover an extensive series of vocabulary tasks. Besides, its *exercise menu* is a three-fold layout, containing *academic word list*, *topic vocabulary* and *dictation*, all of which introduce students to a wealth of vocabulary activities like:

a) *words in context*, a multiple choice exercise having students choose the word or phrase that best describes the word in bold; in addition to this, English students are also asked to double-click on the word in bold to get the dictionary definition;
b) *word meaning*, a lexical challenge that demands students to *match the words with their appropriate definitions*; besides, English students are asked to double-click on a word to get the dictionary definition;
c) *a noun-based exercise*, requiring students to type the noun form of the verb in the space. As always, double-clicking on a word to get the dictionary definition is part of the equation.
d) *word forms* is an exercise asking students to type the correct form of the word in brackets in the available space; students' reference point is, again, the dictionary definition;
e) *negative forms* exercise asks students to type in the correct negative prefix for a set of lexical items, double-clicking on a word to get the dictionary definition;
f) *an adjective-related exercise*, with English language students having to type the adjective which matches the noun in the given space; needless to reiterate that the use of dictionary is pivotal to the overall exercise;
g) *a collocation exercise*, designed for students to choose the most appropriate word from a series of four options to complete a number of sentences. Double-clicking on a word to get the dictionary definition is intrinsic to all types of such vocabulary exercises.
h) *prepositions* come to the forefront thanks to exercises such as *choosing the correct preposition from among a series of three options to complete a given number of sentences*;
i) *focusing on synonyms* prompts students to engage in another vocabulary activity demanding them to match the words that have a similar meaning;
j) *which word* exercises ask students to choose the correct word from series of four in order to complete each sentence;
k) *opposites*-related exercises enable English language learners to match the words that have an opposite meaning.

Also, the comprehensive set of *worksheets* from Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, available on CD-ROM, gives English language students the opportunity to tap into an array of exercises based on *finding the right word, collocates and fixed phrases, register, irregular forms* (e.g.

irregular verb forms), nouns, adjectives and adverbs, grammar patterns, synonyms and opposites, notes[3]*, pronunciation*[4] as well as on *headwords and derivatives, stress*[5]*, British and American English-vocabulary, British and American English-spelling, British and American English-pronunciation, cultural matters*[6]*, spelling, punctuation, the Oxford 3000*^{TM} [7] *, definitions, shortcuts, idioms, phrasal verbs, abbreviations, geographical names,* and, of course, countless *examples.*

6. Browsing Online Dictionaries

Whether it's the online *Oxford Learner's Dictionary*, the *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*, or *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*, English language learners are bound to immerse themselves into *a world of words, collocations, idioms, and phrasal verbs, interspersed with grammar principles and phonetic rules*, all of them conveyed in a clear fashion, marked by easy-to-grasp definitions, and audio pronunciations alike. What's more, thousands of thoroughly selected example sentences flesh out the use of all components contained by dictionaries, paving the way for students' sound understanding.

In the light of all the above, and well aware of how much structure these reference tools lend to the lengthy process of language learning, we reiterate our belief that nowadays dictionaries are still worth consulting on a regular basis, standing English language learners in good stead in the short, medium, and long term: 'Assertive learners will constantly ruminate on ideas in an attempt to capture the quintessence of their thinking. In the same fashion, they tend to pledge an unwavering commitment to persuasively shaping their views. On the whole, it looks like successful English learners are bound to always go in pursuit of new words, alternative idioms, interesting phrasal verbs, and further ways to polish their speech up.' (Iliescu, 2021: 68-9)

To begin with, the online *Oxford Learner's Dictionary* provides language learners with a host of information and linguistic resources, structured as follows:

a) *what are the most important words to learn?* The answers are readily shaped by an invite to *explore either the Oxford 3000*, or *the Oxford 5000*.
b) *Oxford Learner's Word Lists*, designed, as we are told, to help language learners, irrespective of their level, to prioritize lexical choices. The aforementioned *word lists* include, among others, *OPAL* which stands for *Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon,* and *Oxford Phrase List* which covers the most important phrases to learn in English.
c) *spread the word*, a recent addition to the digital dictionary;
d) *topic dictionaries* come across as a step forward in terms of enabling English language students to expand their vocabulary, with each topic being addressed by dividing the specific lexis into smaller segments, while also labelling every word with the corresponding CEFR level. Additionally, English language learners can easily browse the topics covered, thus equally honing their vocabulary and pronunciation skills, given the fact that the online *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries* allow them to always listen to new words' pronunciation in both British and American English.
e) *learn & practise grammar* amounts to a combination of succinct grammar rules with engaging exercises;
f) *Practical English Usage* (PEU) by Michael Swan answers the queries of both teachers and learners about English language grammar and vocabulary;
g) *grammar terms* is a section intended to dispel English language learners' confusion in relation to the essential grammatical concepts.

[3] ****Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, Oxford.Oxford University Press, 2010: 'In the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, a lot of extra information is given in special notes which help' students 'decide which word to use, build up' their 'vocabulary, avoid grammatical mistakes and find out more about English and the English-speaking world.'
[4] *Ibid*.: 'The pronunciation of English words is shown in the dictionary after the headword, inside the //. (…) there are two pages on pronunciation at the back of the dictionary.'
[5] *Ibid*.: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 'shows the pronunciation for English words, and this includes the stress. *Stress* is very important, because it is hard to understand a word pronounced with the wrong stress.'
[6] *Ibid*.: 'Knowing about the culture of English-speaking countries is part of knowing the language.'
[7] *Ibid*.: 'The Oxford 3000^{TM} is a list of the 3000 most useful and important words in English.'

Furthermore, the *online Cambridge Learner's Dictionary* is a much needed linguistic tool for anyone preparing for intermediate Cambridge exams. Based on the Cambridge English Corpus, a database of over 2 billion words, it provides students with invaluable insights into English: vocabulary, phonetics, and grammar-wise.

Next, we would like to underline that, thanks to the *online Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*, committed learners are able to navigate a plethora of grammar explanations, with hundreds of examples reflecting the way language is shaped into naturally-sounding English. The grammatical component is, thus, divided into an array of topics such as: *adjectives and adverbs; easily confused words; nouns, pronouns and determiners; prepositions and particles; adjectives and adverbs; easily confused words; using English; verbs; words, sentences and clauses; common mistakes in English* as well as *words, sentences and clauses*.

Additionally, *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online* enables English language learners to engage in a host of activities ranging from *English vocabulary, intermediate grammar, advanced grammar* to *listening and pronunciation* as well as *exam preparation.* Therefore, LDOCE may successfully be integrated into English language classes thanks to its interactive exercises, which will help students to practise grammar, prepare for exams such as TOEFL, IELTS, Pearson Test of English or Cambridge English qualification, improve their listening and pronunciation skills, do a series of diagnostic or exit tests, and also learn more English collocations, synonyms, idioms as well as phrasal verbs.

7. Dictionary Literacy: Decoding vs. Encoding

Although comprehending a word within a text is a foundational step, for English language learners to properly use it in writing, we agree that a greatly more elaborate perspective is needed since effective usage means not only a mere *semantic decoding*, but also a deeper understanding of how that particular word matches the more complex architecture of both a sentence and the entire text, too: '*Decoding* is fairly straightforward. Materially it is a one-step operation. It involves a few mental operations after consulting the dictionary, such as adapting a translational equivalent to the context in which the unknown word was found. (…) *Encoding*, on the other hand, still involves several material steps. The process consists of: translating the item; having an idea of the register of the word and its syntactical, pragmatical and other constraints. These are operations which at present still imply looking for information in different places.' (Humblé, 2001: 16)

Consequently, the action of *decoding* (comprehending what a word means, yet not in a spontaneous way) doesn't overlap with that of *encoding* (producing language samples, again, not in a spontaneous manner). (*Id.*: 98-101; 'Academic Writing in English. General information on dictionary use', 2020)

While *encoding* involves several linguistic layers, we will address the two main components: *word grammar* and *collocation*[8].

It is widely acknowledged that learners often perceive *grammar* and *vocabulary* as distinct building blocks of the process of language learning instead of interconnected areas. Therefore, such confusion often gives rise to frequent linguistic inaccuracies, which stem not from the overarching sentence structure, but from the specific grammatical features of separate words.

Therefore, we hold the view that English learners can address the aforementioned linguistic inaccuracies by increasing their awareness of *the distinct patterns that must follow a verb*, *the transitivity aspect* (students should be able to determine whether a particular verb requires a direct object, or not) as well as *prepositional collocation*, that is identifying the appropriate prepositions that match the words in question.

Additionally, *collocations* refer to the conventional pairings of words that lend a natural-sounding expression to the language. For instance, while the English language vocabulary accepts the pairing

[8] Philippe Humblé, *Dictionaries and Language Learners*, Frankfurt am Main. Haag und Herchen, 2001, p. 152: '*Collocations*. Collocates consist, by definition, of the words which occur most often with the target word. It is therefore likely that if advanced learners want to use a word, they will recognise the one that goes with it and applies to the context at hand. Examples could additionally dispel any doubts.'

of *heavy rain* and *strong winds*, combinations such as *strong rain* or *heavy winds* are deemed to be non-collocational. (Lea, 2015; 'Academic Writing in English. General information on dictionary use', 2020).

While inaccurate *collocations* rarely entail a lack of basic comprehension, they often call into question the linguistic precision, thus creating some stylistic dissonance, too. In the same vein, extensive knowledge of these lexical associations prompts English language learners to convey a fairly more nuanced message and also ensure that the reader stays focused on the content rather than on the form: 'Also, we do believe that by helping students to develop their *dictionary skills*, we may succeed in raising their awareness of how instrumental business English collocations are to the overall vocabulary competence. Furthermore, the most compelling evidence of dictionary usefulness resides in students' ability to acknowledge a hotchpotch of ideas as opposed to meaningful sentences.'(Iliescu, 2025: 99).

Summarising, English language students are likely to grasp the principles which underpin a larger, more intricate grammatical frame if they come to the realization that mastering *dictionary skills* equates to a worthwhile step to take when committed to acquiring a foreign language.

8. How Instrumental Are Dictionaries in Language Learning?

It's widely acknowledged the fact that dictionaries may equally enable English language learners to explore an entire linguistic universe and chart an incremental language progress, awakening their *intellectual curiosity*.

Whether is for *enhancing vocabulary acquisition*, *encouraging independent learning*, *developing core language skills*, *cultivating critical thinking* or *expanding cultural competence*, dictionaries are definitely worth students' undivided attention.

We assume that, when English language learners are intent on engaging with dictionaries, there is a clear sense of their skills being positively impacted. Therefore, students become able to assimilate and, also, work with impressive linguistic notions covering the use of synonyms, antonyms, and collocations. Likewise, in terms of independent learning skills, dictionaries allow students to gradually gain more and more autonomy, thus managing their lexical workload outside classes.

Not without significance is the fact that dictionary-based activities can be designed in accordance with the specific nature of *reading*, *writing*, *listening*, and *speaking*, hence their unquestionable contribution to honing English language learners' 'core language skills'.

Given the fact that dictionaries come across as worthwhile reference tools that assist the language learning process, English language students are also prompted to enhance their 'critical thinking' and 'problem-solving abilities' by learning how to best 'analyse', 'evaluate language' as well as to capture its subtle nuances.

What's more, thanks to dictionary literacy, English language students are likely to both expand their 'cultural understanding' and 'appreciate the cultural nuances' contained by the language into the bargain. ('Are Dictionaries Still Useful in Language Teaching Today', 2024)

9. Conclusion

Dictionaries, when integrated into language learners' daily study activities, facilitate long-term *vocabulary retention* and improve English language learners' *word retrieval*, too.

In our view, using dictionaries amounts to embarking on a linguistically calibrated treasure-hunt-like journey, throughout which language learners are bound to reap their lexical and phonetical rewards.

Likewise, when plunged into the vast universe of dictionaries, learners are likely to equally acquire a profound sense of the extraordinarily rich fabric of English and assimilate its grammar principles, which govern the linguistic architecture.

Were we to agree with Montesquieu that *'You have to learn a great deal to know a little.'*[9], then dictionaries would most certainly pave English students' way for language learning advancement.

[9] https://www.brainyquote.com

To conclude, we are of the opinion that learners can genuinely enhance their English language skills once they integrate these authoritative, reliable reference tools into their study routine, given that dictionaries do symbolize the relentless quest for knowledge alongside an *intellectual curiosity* to unravel language mysteries.

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