JALT JOURNAL, VOLUME 11, NO. 1

EFL DICTIONARIES, THE TEACHER AND THE STUDENT

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Abstract

In this paper, I argue that foreign language teaching has to include the use of both *bilingual* dictionaries and those *monolingual* dictionaries specially written for learners. Bilingual dictionaries are an essential aid for providing *ready translation equivalents* for common words, and *exact translation equivalents* for technical terms; but they foster the belief that the foreign language has the same meaning discriminations as the mother tongue. Monolingual learner dictionaries provide access to the world of meaning discriminations made by the target language; and provide definitions which distinguish subtle differences in meaning. Dictionary-using skills must be taught, and these have to include paraphrasing skills.

1. Introduction

In the context of foreign language learning reference to dictionaries is usually immediately interpreted as reference to *bilingual* dictionaries because all learners of a foreign language sooner or later use a bilingual dictionary. Such a lexicographical reference book is an indispensable learning tool in foreign language acquisition. I want to make this very clear from the beginning. The role of the dictionary in foreign language teaching is rarely discussed at all in the literature, and if it is, this is done in a rather cursory way. Some authors feel that they should make a professional announcement on which type of dictionary is to be given preference and one finds the use of the bilingual dictionary discouraged and the monolingual dictionary unanimously recommended. This gives the issue an *either-or* look. It is against this background that I would like to stress that for anyone who really wants to master a foreign language both types of dictionary, the bilingual and the monolingual, above all the monolingual EFL dictionary, are indispensable reference tools. A one-sidedly negative picture of the bilin-

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gual dictionary and a positive one for the monolingual dictionary is not only professionally unsound, but also detrimental to the learners. Dictionary-using skills have to be taught and practised. As pointed out earlier, all foreign language students use bilingual dictionaries. If the use of the latter is discouraged by teachers, these very teachers will not assist their learners in:

a. choosing the right bilingual dictionary for their needs;
b. acquiring the dictionary-using skills necessary for this particular type of reference book;
c. understanding the inherent differences and limitations of bilingual dictionaries compared to monolingual ones.

Our daily experience as teachers of a foreign language is that we use both types of dictionary side by side: when we read an English newspaper or a novel, we look up unknown items in a bilingual or a monolingual English dictionary; when we are writing a letter or essay in English, we double-check the translation equivalents offered by our bilingual dictionary in the monolingual EFL dictionary; we marked our student papers with the EFL dictionary at our side because it is more explicit with respect to English grammar and usage. Our daily professional experience then obliges us to help our students to extract from a bilingual as well as a monolingual dictionary the information they are looking for.

I assume that what holds for me, and many, many language teachers in Europe, may also hold for many of you: no one ever taught, showed us how to use a dictionary successfully; neither at school, nor at university, nor at the teacher's training college. We had to work it out for ourselves then, and we still are doing so. Yet our teaching should not wholly be determined by what we were taught. When we have recognized that modern foreign language teaching methodology has neglected a central aspect in the language acquisition process, we have to do something about it. This is not easy because we will be at the beginning of a new tradition, but changes have to start at some stage and for dictionary education they are already on the way: the dictionary user and dictionary-using skills have become research objects in England, France, India, Israel, Poland, Yugoslavia, West Germany and Japan, of course. Four years ago, for instance, one of your colleagues, Yukio Tono, presented a thesis on "The Dictionary User's Reference Skills" to the Faculty of the Department of English Education, Tokyo Gakugei University. A classic in the literature on the behaviour of dictionary users is James Baxter's article (Baxter, 1980) in which 342 Japanese students of English were questioned.

If we want to show our students how to use a bilingual and a monolingual

EFL dictionary, we have to know which dictionaries are available and for which specific groups of users they were compiled. This is not an easy task, but a regular and systematic perusal of the professional teaching journals with respect to publishers' advertisements of their latest products and reviewers' critical assessments of new dictionaries will ease our burden enormously. The increased scholarly interest taken in dictionaries and dictionary education has produced three new journals on the linguistic side: *Dictionaries*, the journal of the Dictionary Society of North America, is published in the United States; *Lexicographica*, the joint periodical of the European Association for Lexicography (EURALEX) and the Dictionary Society of North America, in West Germany; and the latest-comer, the *International Journal of Lexicography*, in England by Oxford University Press. Other linguistic journals have meanwhile devoted a special issue to questions relating to dictionaries and dictionary use. A well-known example, for instance, is the thematic issue "Lexicography and Its Pedagogic Implications" in volume II (3) of *Applied Linguistics*. The more we know about the basic tools of our trade, dictionaries, and the greater our familiarity with them, the more natural and positive will be the dictionary attitude that we as teachers convey to our learners. This positive image is needed to encourage beginners when their first searches take a long time and are not always successful.

2. Dictionary-using Purposes and Skills

Being able to use a dictionary is obviously not an end in itself. We use a dictionary in order to understand what someone has said to us, or what we are reading, or we use it in order to be able to express what we want to say or write; that is, a dictionary is an aid to communication.

However, filling one's immediate communication gaps is not equivalent to permanent vocabulary acquisition. Our aim in teaching our students how to consult dictionaries to their advantage is to make it also a language learning tool, above all a *vocabulary learning tool.*

At the intermediate level vocabulary teaching will have to concentrate on increasing the size of the lexicon, on its differentiation and on building up the meanings of words. At the advanced level, idiomaticity and collocations, in addition, will have to be given special emphasis. Of course, this is being done at present, and in the explicit teaching of synonyms, antonyms and whole word fields vocabulary differentiation has received greater attention in recent years. But the poor vocabulary command of most pupils and

students is ample evidence that this is not enough.

We all know that the best and quickest way to learn a foreign language is to live for some time in a country in which it functions as a mother tongue. In the teaching of a foreign language the natural environment is missing: that is, exposure to the foreign language is usually restricted to the classroom. We impress upon our learners that they should avail themselves of any opportunity to speak or listen to the foreign language in question. Teaching methodologists stress the importance of reading because if it is done regularly, it provides constant exposure to the foreign language.

Let us for one moment assume that our learners' minds are well motivated and set to this task. When reading texts in the foreign language, our learners will come across many new, unknown words. What do we do as teachers to help them overcome the barriers that block understanding? If we follow present-day teaching methodologists, we are supposed to do two things:

1. to reduce as much as possible the learners' frustration, panic that arises from not understanding,
2. to develop the skills of guessing and inferring.

Guessing and inferring are indispensable in linguistic behaviour and such skills have to be developed—but this is not enough. Dictionary-using skills have to be developed as well. At the beginner's level a bilingual dictionary provides the reassurance learners need in order not to feel lost or helpless. Yet from the intermediate level onwards they have to get accustomed to using an EFL dictionary because it is the better language learning tool and will speed up the vocabulary learning process. Let me illustrate this with an example. I apologize for not being able to illustrate the bilingual part with Japanese, instead my own mother tongue, German, will have to do. Imagine that our learners come across the description of a snack bar scene in an English novel along the following lines:

> The old man was very fragile. He moved on towards the group of players, carefully walking close to the counter in order not to fall.

The only unknown word is *counter*. Figure 1 gives the entry from a bilingual English-German dictionary (Terrell, 1980) and Figure 2 shows the entry from an EFL dictionary (Summers, 1987). Our learners will scan the translation equivalents given in the bilingual dictionary, and with the context *snack bar* at the back of their minds, they will discard the 'shop'-sense and 'office'-sense and pick the right equivalent *Theke*("the place in a bar, restaurant, etc. where drinks are sold"). The equation *counter=Theke* may be kept in their minds. That *counter* can also mean *Ladentisch* ("the

counter [kaʊntə] 1 *n* (a) (*in shop*) Ladentisch, Tresen (*N Ger*) *m*; (*in cafe*) Theke *f*;'(*in bank, post office*) Schalter *m*. **to sell/buy sth under/over the ~** etw unter dem/über den Ladentisch verkaufen/bekommen; **medicines which can be bought over the ~** Medikamente, die man rezeptfrei bekommt; **under the ~ dealings** (*fig*) Kungeleien *pl* (*inf*), dunkle *or* undurchsichtige Geschäfte, Schiebereien *pl*.

(b) (*small disc for games*) Spielmarke *f*.

(c) (*Tech*) Zähler *m*.

(d) (*Sport*) (*Fencing*) Parade *f*; (*Boxing also*) Konter *m*.

(e) (*reply*) Entgegnung, Erwiderung, Replik (*geh*) *f*.

Figure 1.

coun•ter[1] / kàuntə /'*n* **1** a narrow table or flat surface at which customers are served in a shop, bank, etc.: *I'm sorry, this counter is closed now.* **2 over the counter** (when buying drugs) without a doctor's PRESCRIPTION: *You can buy antibiotics over the counter in this country.* **3 under the counter** privately, secretly, and often illegally: *You can buy alcohol under the counter, but it's risky and expensive.*

Figure 2

place in a shop where something is exchanged—goods for money") as well as *Schalter* ("the place in a bank, at a post office, at a railway station, where you get service") will have to be learnt through other contexts because for the average German speaker *Theke, Ladentisch* and *Schalter* are completely different words embedded in different associative fields. If these same students had to translate a sentence in which the word *Bankschalter* occurred ("counter in a bank"), it would be unlikely that they would hit upon the word they had learned for *Theke*.

If we now consider the meaning explanation given in the EFL dictionary, the explanation highlights the central semantic features: firstly, that it is a place, and secondly, the purpose of this place. Foreign learners who consult the monolingual EFL dictionary are given an English paraphrase of the meaning which will enable them to understand the item in the concrete example. If the meaning has been memorized, they will also be able to suggest *counter* as a translation equivalent for *Bankschalter* when they come across it. In the classroom the teacher may even take up the English paraphrase and by guiding his or her students make them realize that it is a

place where something is exchanged, usually for money, so it is really a place where money is counted. Expounding the applications of the word, the teacher may in addition elicit from his or her learners that what is conceptualized as one sense in English is much more "complicated" in German because it expresses the same concept in three different and more specialized ways.

3. Bilingual and Monolingual Dictionaries Compared

On the basis of this example we might contrast what is going on in our learners' minds when they use a bilingual dictionary and when they use a monolingual EFL dictionary. When the bilingual dictionary is used for comprehension, it provides *quick general understanding*, which is a positive feature. Indeed for certain kinds of words, such as the names of plants, animals, cultural institutions, technical and scientific terms, the bilingual dictionary is indispensable. Without it, it is very difficult to get a precise understanding of such words. Below are two definitions—minus the headwords—one for a plant, the other for an animal:

> ... *n* (a small garden plant with) a sweet smelling white, pink, or red flower: ... (Summers, 1987)

> ... A ... is a small furry animal with a long tail. There are many kinds of ...; some live in people's houses and some live in the fields. (Sinclair, 1987)

If you now try to derive the headwords from the explanations (which is what, in essence, our students have to do), you will find that the explanations are inadequate to identify the headword with certainty. The explanations for both the flower and the animal call to mind a number of different referents. (They actually are *carnation* and *mouse*.)

Equally, when the bilingual dictionary is used for production, it supplies the learners with *ready translation equivalents* for common words, and with *exact translation equivalents* for scientific, technical and institutional terms. This again is a positive feature.

There is another very familiar situation of text production in which the use of the bilingual dictionary is the most expedient help: in situations in which we want to recall an item that we have forgotten. Imagine, for instance, that you want to refer to shoes that have a thick wooden sole and a leather upper. You know that English has a word for it but you cannot remember it. As a German native, I would look up the German word *Holzschuh* in my bilingual dictionary and the equivalents in a well-known

modern German-English dictionary are:

> **Holzschuh** *m* wooden shoe, clog, sabot (Collins, 1980)

I am offered three translation equivalents among which I recognize the item *clog* that had escaped my memory.

For advanced learners of English the listing of three translation equivalents does not pose any problems because their command of the English language makes them pick the right one. For beginners, however, such undifferentiated lists of translation equivalents are of no help: they cannot discriminate between them and it is a matter of chance whether they will pick the one that is appropriate for their particular context. This then is one of the areas where the use of a bilingual dictionary is bound to yield unsatisfactory results.

In the case of *counter* we have seen that the use of the bilingual dictionary is less expedient in building up the meaning of an English word because our learners would need at least three different occurrences of *counter* to cover *Theke, Ladentisch* and *Schalter*. Apart from the slower acquisition process which would consist in the internalization of

> counter = Theke
> counter = Ladentisch
> counter = Schalter

there is no guarantee that the individual learning instances will become integrated and unified in the learners' minds to something that corresponds roughly to the general meaning provided by the monolingual EFL dictionary.

A more serious intrinsic disadvantage that is inseparably linked with the use of a bilingual dictionary is the internalization of slightly inexact meanings of words. Imagine that learners have come across a sentence like

> My windows *vibrate* whenever a heavy lorry passes.

They do not understand the item *vibrate* and consult a bilingual dictionary where they are given the following information:

> **vibrate** ... 1 *vi* (*lit. fig*) zittern, beben (*with* vor + *dat*); (*machine, string, air*) vibrieren; (*notes*) schwingern ...
> 2 *vt* zum Vibrieren bringen; *string* zum Schwingen bringen ...

Our learners will pick the verb *beben* and associate *vibrate* = zittern, beben and *beben, zittern* = vibrate. A couple of days later, our learners might want to express or translate that someone was very angry and trembling with rage. Their German source sentence is something like *er bebte vor Wut, er zitterte*

vor Wut. Remembering their earlier lesson, they will all produce a translation *he was vibrating with rage*—which is unEnglish. If they had used a monolingual EFL dictionary, they would have learnt that the intransitive verb *to vibrate* denotes slight shaking and that it cannot be used with a subject that denotes a human being:

> **vibrate** ... If something **vibrates** or if you **vibrate** it, it shakes with a very slight, very quick movement, which can often be felt rather than seen. (Sinclair, 1987)

The bilingual dictionary thus tends to veil subtle meaning differences, whereas the monolingual EFL dictionary makes them explicit.

In general, bilingual dictionaries provide translation equivalents that can usually easily be substituted for the L_1 or L_2 item. Monolingual EFL dictionaries define or paraphrase the meaning of a word in English. The use of a bilingual dictionary therefore means a constant switching from the mother tongue to the foreign tongue and vice versa. In the case of the EFL dictionary, learners stay within the same language; they are exposed to English explanations and to English example sentences. The constant switching from one language to the other furthers our learners' belief that languages are simple nomenclatures, that the foreign language has the same meaning discriminations as their mother tongue, but just other names. This 'nomenclature attitude' is an inevitable initial stage in all foreign language learning. The longer the learning process continues, the more students realize that each language has its own view of the world which they are gradually penetrating. It is our duty as teachers to help them as much as possible to structure reality with the minds of the foreign language speakers. This is why we have to wean them away from their slavish adherence to the bilingual dictionary, why we have to introduce them to the EFL dictionary which is more appropriate to open the doors and windows to another conceptualization of reality.

Furthermore, the nomenclature attitude makes us and keeps us tongue-tied, that is, as soon as our learners encounter an unknown word or lack a translation equivalent, they will halt, panic, and call for the bilingual dictionary which may not always be available. They are linguistically helpless. The EFL dictionary, in contrast, if taught and practiced properly, will prepare them to face and cope with such situations naturally and calmly. They will learn that they can elicit a foreign item from their interlocutor by paraphrasing its meaning and they will be used to understanding paraphrases, explanations of word meanings given in English.

4. Paraphrases

Let us therefore concentrate for the rest of this lecture on this central aspect of the monolingual EFL dictionary: the meaning explanations or paraphrases.

We all know that the change-over from a bilingual to a monolingual EFL dictionary constitutes a major learning and teaching step. As we leave what we think of as the safe ground of the mother tongue, the meaning explanations seem so abstract—"If something vibrates or if you vibrate it, it shakes with a very slight, very quick movement, which can often be felt rather than seen" ..., part of the vocabulary used in the explanations may be unknown and the syntax is unusual—"If something vibrates or if you vibrate it, ..."

What can we as teachers do to make our learners grasp the nature of monolingual English meaning descriptions? The most successful teaching method is to relate the new unit to something familiar and known, to point out the similarities between the old and the new. The link that we have to provide is that such descriptions are very similar to a type of linguistic behaviour that we all practice in our mother tongue when someone asks us what something means. A child or a foreigner may ask us, for example, what *limp* means and we will answer something like "limp is when someone has hurt his leg or foot and walks unevenly." Our explanations are usually not as exact and comprehensive as those in a dictionary, but the principle of describing the meaning is the same. People's exposure to children or foreigners varies and therefore some of us and some of our students may have more experience and practice in explaining word meanings than others, and they may thus have developed what we might call 'paraphrasing skills'. In some countries in which the education system insists on teaching dictionary-using skills for the mother tongue, students may be quite proficient in paraphrasing word meanings. Whatever the concrete situation may be in which we have to teach, we have to build on whatever basis our students have and so develop these paraphrasing skills.

They are taught best by setting a good example. This implies for our teaching practice that part of it will have to be changed: the way we all handle situations when we encounter an unknown word in a text that we are reading with our students, when someone or we ourselves use a word not known to our pupils. Our learners will ask "What does this word mean?" We mostly handle such questions in the following ways:

1. We address the question to the class to see whether a fellow-student can help. This fellow-student supplies a translation equivalent. If there is no

offer from the learners, we ourselves name the translation equivalent.

2. Instead of a translation equivalent, a student or we ourselves may provide an English synonym. Thus a learner could have suggested *shake* as a synonym for *vibrate* and if challenged another synonym offer could have been *tremble*. This method of explaining words is sometimes called 'the synonym game'. It has the advantage of a monolingual approach but it has the great disadvantage that our learners are given sets of synonyms without ever being told what the differences of meaning between them are.

At the beginning stage both methods of explaining words are acceptable, but from the end of the beginning stage onwards, we as teachers have to use the paraphrasing method. This means, for instance, that we explain the word *mitten* not as 'glove' but as a glove that has two projections, one for the thumb and one for the rest of the hand. We ourselves, as I said earlier, set the example. When our students start with the synonym game, we gradually guide them to paraphrase the meaning of words by challenging the synonyms offered. Thus, to stay with one of the words already used, if a student offers *shake* as a synonym for the intransitive use of *vibrate*, you may ask further questions: "If the windows vibrate, why do they shake, are they shaking lightly or strongly? Can other things *vibrate*? If yes, which, etc.?" With such questions we set our students' minds working, words become alive and interesting, semantic relations are established between them, the vocabulary world opens up for them—and they will recognize the wealth of information and discrimination provided by a monolingual EFL dictionary.

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