One Benefit of Monolingual Dictionaries in the Writing Classroom

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Introduction

I have worked at two different language schools in which the administrators had an unwritten policy of banning bilingual dictionaries from the classroom. The rationale seemed simple--such dictionaries only perpetuate learners' dependence on the native language (NL). Through experience, I came to agree with the policy and to believe that bilingual dictionaries are more of a hindrance-at least to intermediate or advanced students-than a help to second-language learners. After moving to Taiwan and learning that almost all English learners here use bilingual dictionaries, I needed proof that my notion was correct. Yet as I searched the literature, I found few studies to prove any advantage of using monolingual dictionaries, much less a justification for banning the bilingual dictionaries. The following study was conducted a few years ago originally as work for my master's degree in English. It points to at least one area in which monolingual dictionaries are more helpful than bilingual dictionaries as it is based on the hypothesis that training in the use of monolingual dictionaries will improve students' ability to write, specifically to create acceptable written English when dealing with transitive (T) and intransitive (I) verbs.

In order to test this hypothesis, twenty native Chinese speakers studying at the University of Central Oklahoma were separated into two groups of ten. Both groups were given a survey regarding their knowledge of and attitudes toward dictionaries. The members of the first group were then given a copy of Continental's Concise English-Chinese Dictionary (CCECD), seventh edition, one of the most popular Chinese bilingual dictionaries in book form. The second group received a copy of Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDCE), third edition. Both groups were presented a brief lesson on T and I verbs in which they were also taught how their respective dictionaries recorded entries regarding transitivity and intransitivity. After the ten-minute lesson, each subject was given the same list of ten verbs, some T and some I, with which they were asked to write ten original sentences within twenty minutes. They were encouraged to consider the examples and grammatical patterns within their assigned dictionaries, and they were asked to put a check mark beside the sentences for which they had consulted a dictionary. Following this exercise, they were asked whether they thought their assigned dictionaries had been helpful to them.

The completed sentences were marked according to one criterion only-how the verbs were used. These verbs were either marked as correct, incorrect, or avoided. Correct meant that they met the broadly accepted codified prescriptive grammar rules of American and British English. Incorrect meant that the verb use and complementation failed to meet this standard. Finally, avoided meant that the subject had either not written anything or had simply copied the example from the dictionary.

The First Survey

The results of the first questionnaire were clear: the participants seldom used monolingual dictionaries as a reference when writing in English. Eighty-five percent said they seldom or never used one. Eighty percent also said that they did not own an English-English dictionary. As to why they did not use monolingual dictionaries, two said they did not know how; four said the definitions were too difficult; eight said that the dictionaries took too much time to use while the remaining six said that the definitions were both too difficult and too time-consuming. One-third of the participants claimed that they had not realized that some monolingual dictionaries were written to help L2 learners, and only fifteen percent had received any training in the use of such dictionaries.

On the other hand, as could be expected, all participants owned a bilingual dictionary, and all of them used one to some extent when writing in English. Fifty-four percent often consulted bilingual dictionaries while the remaining forty-six percent rarely or occasionally used them. Eighty-five percent said they used a bilingual dictionary more than a monolingual dictionary.

The Writing Exercise

The subjects were asked to write original sentences using the following ten verbs: "date, mention, reach, look forward to, afford, complain, argue, declare, pontificate, and veer." It was assumed that the verbs "veer and pontificate" would be unfamiliar to most of the participants, therefore making it more likely for the subjects to consult their dictionaries. Table 1 lists the scores (correct, incorrect, avoided) related to the number of times participants used the bilingual CCECD. Table 2 lists the corresponding information for the participants who used the monolingual LCDE.

Table 1. Number of times the translating dictionary was consulted and results of those times (Group 1).

Verbs	Times consulted	Times correct	Times incorrect	Times avoided
1. date	4	1	3	
2. mention	0			
3. reach	0			
4. look forward to	0			
5. afford	2	2		
6. complain	0			
7. argue	0			
8. declare	3		3	
9. pontificate	10	1	9	
10.veer	10	1	8	1
Totals	29	5	23	1

From Tables 1 and 2 it is clear that the group using the monolingual dictionary (group two) performed considerably better than group one which used the bilingual CCECD. It is especially interesting to note that group two did better despite the fact that its median TOEFL score (496) was notably lower than average of group one (517).

Table 2. Number of times the monolingual dictionary was consulted and results of those times (Group 2).

Verbs	Times consulted	Times correct	Times incorrect	Times avoided
1. date	3		3	
2. mention	0			
3. reach	0			
4. look forward to	1			1
5. afford	2			2
6. complain	1	1		
7. argue	1	1		
8. declare	7	4	2	1
9. pontificate	10	3	3	4
10.veer	10	3	4	3
Totals	35	12	12	11

Of the total number of times group one consulted the dictionary, only seventeen percent of those times were marked as correct while

seventy-nine percent were incorrect and three percent were avoided. Of the total number of times group two consulted the dictionary, thirty-four percent of those times were marked as correct while thirty-nine percent were incorrect. Most of the remaining thirty-one percent were classified as avoided since the majority were merely copied from the examples in the dictionary.

The improved performance of group two can perhaps be attributed to the monolingual dictionary which offers simplified definitions and clear examples for most of its entries. The CCECD provides fairly reliable examples as well. However, the definitions are naturally in Chinese making it quite possible that when students consult these dictionaries, their native language interferes creating what Tarone, Cohen, and Dumas (1983) call "the type of negative transfer from the NL...resulting in utterances that are not just inappropriate but actually incorrect by native standards" (p.5). The improved performance of group two lends cogency to the practice of encouraging students to use monolingual dictionaries specifically when having trouble with T and I verbs.

The Second Survey

After finishing the writing exercise, participants were asked, "Do you think that learning more about your assigned dictionary could help you to write in English?" All ten participants who used the monolingual dictionary believed that the dictionary would be helpful. Of the ten participants who used the CCECD, two did not believe that dictionary would be helpful.

Conclusion

McCarthy (1990) suggests that bilingual dictionaries are important, but they are also limited tools. Given the fact that a group of learners with a lower average TOEFL score used verbs correctly a higher percentage of the time when using a monolingual dictionary than those who used a bilingual dictionary, it would appear that monolingual dictionaries deserve a place in the ESL/EFL curriculum. Teachers should be encouraged to conduct similar experiments to find ways in which monolingual dictionaries can lessen the dependence many students have on bilingual dictionaries.

References

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