

Considerations of Choosing an English-English Dictionary for ESL Students

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An English-English dictionary is an essential and invaluable resource for ESL students at various levels, yet many of the dictionaries recommended to students are too sophisticated for students' lexical abilities. This article will discuss the criteria instructors should consider when selecting and recommending English-English dictionaries, and will examine how dictionary definitions can vary in degree of difficulty, thereby making vocabulary learning more complex.

Introduction

Acquiring new words is a primary concern for most ESL students, as they seem to feel that an extensive vocabulary is an essential component of becoming a fluent English speaker. As a result, ESL students learn to rely heavily on English-English dictionaries--hard copy and electronic--to facilitate the language learning process, but often use dictionaries that are too linguistically complex or which act merely as translators. As a result, students often look to their English instructors for suggestions on which is the best dictionary to help them better understand and learn the language. The answer to this question seems simple – buy a good English-English dictionary. But what exactly constitutes a good English-English dictionary? The answer cannot only be determined by which brand of dictionary is most affordable or most available, nor can it be based on an instructor's own familiarity with a particular dictionary. When recommending an English-English dictionary to ESL students, an instructor must consider a number of elements such as the level of the students, and the degree of ease with which the dictionary can be used. An instructor must also consider whether students have the knowledge of how a dictionary functions and of how to interpret and use the information provided in dictionary definitions.

This paper will examine many of the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of English-English dictionaries when used as a tool for language learning among ESL students in an attempt at providing a guide for instructors to use when recommending dictionaries to students. This examination will include a discussion of what constitutes a good dictionary as well as an analysis of ESL students' prior knowledge of dictionary use. Many of the findings discussed within are based on experiences with ESL students studying in an advanced-level academic preparatory program at a Canadian university, and their experiences with English-English dictionaries. It will also discuss the challenges that English-English dictionary definitions can pose for ESL students and will offer suggestions as to what instructors and students should be looking for in definitions when selecting English-English dictionaries.

Assumptions about Dictionary Use

An appropriate place to begin is with a discussion of the various assumptions that both instructors and dictionary publishers seem to make about students (ESL in particular) and their use of dictionaries. First, many ESL instructors seem to assume that all students are equipped with the knowledge of how an English-English dictionary functions and is used. Perhaps this stems from their personal experiences as students, whose teachers expected and required them to know how to use a dictionary. Likewise, it could derive from the expectation that students arrive in their classes with an understanding of how L1 (first language/native language) dictionaries function, and so they assume these skills are transferable to use with an English-English dictionary. These expectations and assumptions are far from the reality of the situation. When asked whether they had ever been given explicit instruction by a foreign or domestic instructor on how to use an English-English dictionary, thirty-one out of thirty-two ESL students responded that they had never been formally introduced to an English-English dictionary and its functions. Even more surprising is the fact that only one out of thirty-two students surveyed claimed to have been taught how to use an L1 dictionary.

While these results are not true of every ESL student, what remains is that instructors cannot assume that students are familiar or comfortable with dictionary use. The same seems to be true of dictionary publishers who assume that students are being provided with the prior instruction necessary to use a dictionary properly, while also assuming that students have the language skills necessary to use such an important reference tool effectively and with ease. And while most English-English dictionaries include introductory guides designed to facilitate students' dictionary use, these guides seem to offer very limited assistance to students below a high-intermediate level of proficiency. As McKeown (1993) indicates, "dictionary consultation assumes a lexical, linguistic sophistication on the part of the user. It demands the user possess broad semantic categories to relate the unfamiliar word&". Yet, ESL instructors know that such skills are necessary for both native and non-native speakers if they are to learn unfamiliar words through the use of a dictionary. Therefore, it is essential for instructors to provide explicit instruction in how to use an English-English dictionary if students are expected to benefit from dictionary consultation.

Challenges of Dictionary Use for ESL Students

It is clear that with proper guidance and instruction on prudent use of English-English dictionaries, ESL students' language learning can be made much easier. Not only can dictionary consultation assist students, it is considered the initial step in learning a new word (Gonzalez 1999). Dictionary use cannot be effective, however, unless performed with a well-structured, user-friendly dictionary. ESL Instructors are typically aware of how frustrating dictionaries can be, especially in terms of how definitions are presented and worded, but for second-language learners, the wording used in typical definitions can be extremely intimidating. As Rhoder and Huerster (2002) point out in their research on the relationship between dictionary use and vocabulary learning, "Definitions are short, abstract generalizations often written in dense, embedded text. No concrete examples are offered, and ideas are never repeated in different words&". In light of the difficulties certain dictionaries present for ESL students, what should instructors be looking for in a good dictionary for their students? In other words, what are the criteria of a useful and effective English-English dictionary, especially for ESL students?

Criteria of a Good English-English Dictionary

While most English-English dictionaries provide the same standard pieces of information about each word, including part of speech, phonetic spelling, and a list of meanings for each word, it is the way in which these pieces of information are presented that determines whether a student can benefit from using the dictionary. Therefore, a good English-English dictionary for ESL students should include most, if not all, of the following components:

- A list of possible definitions of a word presented in order of frequency of use (most common to least common). If structured this way, students will be able to recognize which is the most popular use of a word, rather than trying to determine this independently.
- Definitions that show high levels of differentiation. This will enable students to become familiar with the various uses of a word without a great deal of confusion and additional searching.
- Definitions should be followed by useful and clear contextual examples, or by what Gonzalez (1999) calls, "high explanatory support&". This is likely the most essential component of a good dictionary, as it is these types of examples that provide students with knowledge of the practical uses of a word. Without practical and clear examples of how a word can be used, dictionaries provide nothing but meaningless lists of unfamiliar words.
- Finally, dictionaries should present multiple pieces of information in a clear, organized, and non-intimidating manner for the user (Gonzalez).

Recognizing what students require from a dictionary to facilitate language acquisition is crucial to an instructor's ability to make an informed recommendation to students. This is only half the battle, however, considering the multitude and variety of English-English dictionaries currently on the market. Instructors must be conscious of students' needs, but must also familiarize themselves with the numerous types and brands of dictionaries available to students. While the simplest solution would be to recommend a time-tested academic favorite, or to have students purchase dictionaries designed specifically for second-language learning, it seems likely that ESL students beyond a high-beginner level would benefit more from using a regular English-English dictionary designed for either native-speakers or general academic study. In this way, students will be exposed to larger vocabularies, while also feeling that the dictionary they are using is not over-simplifying the language because they are

While aspects such as layout, structure, and size of word bank are important factors in whether an English-English dictionary is useful to ESL students, it is the definitions themselves that are the determining factor for ESL students. As a result, instructors must recognize that definitions provided in English-English dictionaries can vary greatly in degree of difficulty. Often, the definitions provided in English-English dictionaries are abstract and difficult to interpret. This reflects the notion that dictionaries often provide dense, multi-layered definitions that only serve to be cognitively disruptive (Rhoder & Huerster 2002) to students' learning process. This problem stems from the fact that many definitions are filled with numerous other words that are most likely unfamiliar to ESL students, which necessitates a never-ending process of searching for word after word. This endless searching can result in the student's inability to learn the meaning of the word he was originally searching for. Neither are definitions always followed by practical, contextual examples of the word, which leaves the user to either guess at how the word is used, or to skip over the word altogether.

In selecting English-English dictionaries that will facilitate ESL students' language learning rather than complicate it, instructors should look for dictionaries that offer definitions which contain wording that is straightforward and easy to understand. Likewise, they should look for definitions in which there are relatively few words that would confuse the user. Finally, to further students' understanding of a word's definition, English-English dictionaries should also provide clear, contextualized examples of how each word is used.

Conclusion

English-English dictionaries are an essential tool in building language for both native and non-native speakers, and as such must be used wisely and with caution. Regardless of a student's level of English proficiency, instructors must recognize that the skills necessary for proper dictionary consultation are not inherent; they must be acquired through explicit instruction and practice. They must also recognize that students rely heavily on the advice of their instructors, especially when making the decision to purchase a dictionary, a book that is likely to become one of students' biggest and most valuable language learning resources. Consequently, instructors need to educate themselves about what components are most important in a student dictionary, as well as of how to teach students the skills required to use a dictionary properly. Most instructors recognize that their students have not yet developed the extensive language skills required to filter meaning out of the abstract and dense wording often used in academic English-English dictionaries, therefore they must recommend dictionaries which are level-appropriate, and which will facilitate students' language learning. In doing so, they will not only be helping their students acquire language in a practical way, but will also be providing them with a sense of independence in the learning process.

References

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