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Towards effective dictionary use by L2 learners: in search of new perspectives

Dictionaries are one of the basic tools of reference used by L2 learners. If exploited effectively, they can serve as a source of important information on language or as an instrument for self-study. The debate on effective dictionary use started in the 70s of the twentieth century and in fact has not ceased up to now. The basic question repeatedly asked by lexicographers as well as language teachers concerns the kind of skills learners need to employ to take advantage of information encoded in dictionaries. The awareness of various strategies that can improve learners' dictionary use is just the first step to educate teachers on the importance of developing learners' dictionary skills. The studies in the field of pedagogical lexicography clearly indicate that the look-up process is complicated and requires detailed analysis. This paper reports the conclusions drawn from selected studies on dictionary use in the language classroom and discusses the knowledge gained thanks to the studies on dictionary skills used by L2 learners. However, there is a new dimension to the issue of dictionary consultation, namely using dictionaries during exams. Since this idea has been gaining importance and, therefore, should not be ignored, the final part of the paper will be devoted to the

rationale for allowing dictionary use during exams, especially writing exams.

1. Ineffective learners' dictionary use and lack of skills

With the growth of interest in the field of pedagogical lexicography within the last fifty years and numerous publications of pedagogical dictionaries researchers became more eager to probe into the process of dictionary use by second/foreign language learners. Their aim was to ascertain that dictionaries compiled by lexicographers were a useful tool efficiently supporting the learning process. Unfortunately, it was discovered that learners consulted dictionaries mainly to find some information on spelling and meaning, frequently ignoring detailed data on different aspects of looked-up words. Thus the components of word knowledge such as pronunciation, synonyms, usage notes and etymologies included in the microstructure tended to be analyzed less frequently if ever (Barnhart 1962, Quirk 1973). Tono (1984) as well as Neubach and Cohen (1988) noted that during dictionary consultations learners repeatedly ignored part of entries containing syntactic information no matter whether the dictionary used was a bilingual or a monolingual one. To discover the meaning of an unknown word, learners would partially scan the entry and opt for the meaning or the equivalent that appeared appropriate. Such a behaviour on the part of learners clearly demonstrated that they were highly confused about the number of information items included in dictionary entries. However, the amount of data they accessed during dictionary consultations was not the only reason for their ineffective dictionary use. It appeared that the language chosen for the entries, especially in monolingual dictionaries, was too difficult (Tomaszczyk 1979, Baxter 1980, Miller and Gildea 1985). Consequently, when the subjects regarded dictionary use as necessary, they opted for a bilingual dictionary rather than a monolingual one (Bensoussan et al. 1984) as the former seemed to be less complicated. It did not mean, nonetheless, that learners used bilingual dictionaries skillfully enough to fulfill researchers' expectations. Conversely, at some point it was discovered that dictionary consultation as such did not guarantee

success in the look-up process. What turned out to be even more distressing for researchers was that there appeared no considerable difference in some studies (Bensoussan et al. 1984) between the outcomes achieved by the two groups of subjects, one using a dictionary while performing the target tasks and the other one managing without dictionary consultation. This most probably stemmed from the fact that the learners lacked appropriate skills; even with a dictionary at their disposal they did not know how to make use of it.

The results of research on dictionary use conducted in the 1970s and 1980s clearly indicated that L2 learners treated dictionaries mostly as a source of meaning conveyed either through definitions or by means of equivalents in their native language. This was not the kind of dictionary use lexicographers expected since learners too often tended to ignore meticulously prepared information for encoding dictionary entries. It became clear that there was a mismatch between users' behaviour and lexicographers' assumptions on users' behaviour.

2. The call for dictionary skills training

Faced with L2 learners' ineffective use of dictionaries researchers and lexicographers could choose to follow two possible paths: (1) producing dictionaries as compilations of user-friendly definitions or (2) educating users on the wealth of information included in dictionaries. In the 1970s and 1980s it became obvious that the second option had to entail thorough skills training in using dictionaries. However, in order to provide learners with proper training it was necessary to gain better understanding into what learners actually do when they consult a dictionary. Therefore, a list of questions concerning the complexity of the learners' look-up process was compiled:

1. How do the users identify the lexical item they want to look up?
2. How do they find what they need in the macrostructure?
3. How do they find what they need in the microstructure?

4. Do users of all societies behave similarly? If not, how do they differ?
5. When do dictionary users consider the consultation process to be completed?
6. What makes them think they have found the information they searched for?

Bejoint (2000)

Due to the apparent complexity of investigating the skills of dictionary users, it became obvious that in order to come to at least some initial conclusions on the problems analyzed it was necessary to eliminate the number of variables dealt with as well as to simplify the experimental procedures. As a consequence, researchers frequently limited the numbers of dictionaries to one type, and different categories of users to one typical user.

Mitchel's (1983) and Tono's (1984) studies revealed that their subjects had difficulty analyzing dictionary entries. They observed that their look-up behaviour was often chaotic as they tended to select pieces of information from dictionary entries at random. The subjects would also use a 'negative choice strategy'. Namely if they did not know what choice to make about the meaning they were searching for, they would select the part of the entry that was not explicitly rejected and afterwards they would often quit the look-up procedure. This sort of behaviour showed that apparently they were not skillful enough to successfully explore dictionary entries and draw final conclusions on the basis of the information they managed to identify.

It was also found that the subjects, who were provided with some training in dictionary strategies, searched for information encoded more effectively (Tono 1984 and Kipfer 1985). Because of this observation, when interpreting learner's look-up behaviour, some researchers (e.g. Scholfield 1982, Tono 1984, Tono 1987, Herbst and Stein 1987) postulated the need for systematic training and development of dictionary skills to be introduced into the classroom environment.

3. Dictionary use and skills at intermediate and advanced levels

In the 90s the studies investigating dictionary use continued to highlight the need for some improvement in learners' consultation skills. As Atkins and Knowles (1990) concluded the difficulty in achieving this aim basically lied in teachers' attitude to pupils' dictionary use. Firstly, teachers regarded it as inferior to guessing from context. Secondly, they did not see it as a complicated process requiring well-informed behaviour on the part of learners. As revealed by specialists the majority of L2 learners had seldom or never received proper strategy training and, as a consequence, they possessed very poor or no dictionary skills (Nesi 1999). A brief analysis of research on dictionary use and skills at intermediate and advanced levels carried out in the 1990s demonstrated how the results of the studies on dictionary use conducted in the last three decades of the 20th century influenced the situation in the language classroom at the beginning of the next millennium.

In Wingate's (2004) study 17 intermediate Chinese learners of German were provided with one bilingual and two monolingual dictionaries to choose from while reading two authentic newspaper texts. The researcher aimed at investigating the look-up process, the difficulties encountered during dictionary consultation and the possible reasons for the learners' unsuccessful attempts at exploring the entries. She noticed that the subjects' dictionary use was frequently unsuccessful. One of the major problems was connected with the search for the meaning of compounds and idioms. The subjects were unable to find them in the dictionaries because they tried to look them up as wholes rather than divide them into words that functioned as headwords. They also failed when confronted with the necessity to locate the infinitives of the past participle forms of the verbs from the texts. The last difficulty they experienced concerned assigning the L1 equivalents to the words from the analyzed texts.

There were two main reasons identified for the look-up problems mentioned. First, the subjects were found to read the dictionary entries superficially. They simply paid scarce attention to the information included in the entries. Second, they lacked proper strategies for dictionary consultation. They studied only the beginnings of the

entries ignoring a large part of the information included further. They used a familiar part of the entry as an equivalent for the unknown word without paying attention to its appropriateness. Such learner behaviour is an example of a negative strategy called 'kidrule' also discussed by Nesi and Meara (1994). Thus, even though the subjects were skillful dictionary users, the results disclosed that they frequently lacked essential strategies.

Szczepaniak's (2007) study involved 143 MA students of two final years at the School of English, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland. She divided them into two groups. The main aim of her research was to check how significantly dictionary use improved comprehension scores in the target language situation. At the beginning the subjects read short texts with underlined parts containing idioms. Their task was to write paraphrases of the selected fragments. Yet, only one group of the subjects was allowed to consult a monolingual dictionary to test their hypotheses about the meanings of idioms. In the final stage, both groups were supposed to create definitions of the vocabulary items selected for the study.

As demonstrated by Szczepaniak (2007) even advanced learners did not possess proper skills to consult dictionaries effectively. They were not attentive enough during the analysis of the dictionary entries and, consequently, did not gather sufficient data on the target lexical chunks. Despite the fact that while using a dictionary they gained some lexical knowledge on the idioms studied, they found it difficult to successfully explain the meanings of those expressions in context. They often resorted to the use of 'kidrule', the same negative strategy as the one applied by the intermediate learners in the study by Wingate (2004). It seemed evident that the subjects relied too much on dictionary entries in terms of arriving at the meaning of lexical items. Such behaviour is an example of a common tendency among dictionary users who frequently expect to be in some way spoon-fed. A similar phenomenon was observed in the study by Bensoussan (1983). As the subjects were often unable to understand the lexical items when more complex analysis of the entry was necessary, she

concluded that some dictionary users lacked the skills of negotiating the meaning of words during dictionary consultation.

The analysis of some research on dictionary use carried out over the last forty years has shown that there is no significant change in practitioners' attitudes to the need of the development of dictionary strategies in L2 settings. It appears that training in dictionary use is still to a large extent an individual decision of a particular L2 teacher who either introduces some instruction into the classroom or ignores the fact that his/her pupils should be able to employ dictionary entries in the process of language learning in an informed way.

4. Dictionary use in testing

Up to this point the major aim of the paper has been to argue for the need for dictionary strategy training and the use of dictionaries in L2 language learning and teaching conditions. The last part of the article will deal with some recent findings into the application of dictionaries, especially bilingual ones in testing.

First of all, what needs to be focused on is the context in which the idea of dictionary use in exams appeared. With the advent of CLT methodologists drew more attention to meaningful language use and gave strong support to the concept of disposing of artificiality in the classroom environment. Changing views made it clear that the CLT methodology also requires the modification of testing procedures Testing was to be understood as measuring pupils' performance by providing them with tasks as authentic and real-life as possible. Consulting a dictionary during an exam was suggested as an essential part of L2 students' language learning and language use. It was also recognized that dictionaries, especially bilingual ones, have their role to play in communication, discourse creation, and negotiation of meaning when different cultural settings as in L2 classrooms have to be considered.

The debate over allowing dictionary use during timed tests has been continued over a number of years. Experts' opinions on this matter differ considerably depending on how they understand the test construct and which approach to assessment they are more prone to

opt for, the constructivist process-oriented or the traditional product-oriented one. Adopting the former, the specialists emphasize learning as the main factor in assessment, whereas favouring the latter they place primary focus on measurement trying to show differences in L2 learners' performance. Even though none of those approaches is inferior as each discloses valuable information concerning students' skills and knowledge, only process-oriented assessment for learning does not exclude dictionary use in examinations. However, to introduce this kind of innovation, researchers have to prove beyond doubt that a dictionary is an authentic and useful tool employed by pupils' at their current proficiency level rather than a source of undesirable influence their test scores.

5. Allowing dictionary use in writing exam – research results

In 1998 bilingual dictionary use was first allowed by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) in the UK'S General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) L2 Examinations, the first externally assessed school examination taken by 15-16 year-olds. However, after the publication of the study by Hurman and Tall (1998) which showed the effects of dictionary use on writing tests' scores dictionary consultation was questioned and finally banned by the authorities in 2003. Nonetheless, the discussion did not end at this stage since some other studies (Bensoussan et al., 1984; Nesi and Meara, 1991; Idstein, 2003) demonstrated no significant difference in the test scores of the learners who were allowed to consult dictionaries in the process of writing.

The study by Hurman and Tall (1998) was also heavily criticized for the following reasons:

- the participants took the 'without dictionary' test as first which might have given them some practice in dealing with task types chosen;
- the 'with dictionary' test might have been easier;
- the raters knew which tests were taken with dictionary consultation so they might have assessed the 'with dictionary'

tests more favourably because they expected a better performance due to the availability of dictionaries.

In response to QCA's decision Martin East (2007) conducted research in order to verify the results presented by Hurman and Tall (1998). The subjects involved in the study were 17–18 year old students in New Zealand secondary schools preparing for the Bursary German examination in 2003. The findings led to the conclusion that the construct validity of the test was not under threat. Moreover, dictionary use in writing tests did not change the test results considerably regardless of test takers' experience with dictionaries. East (2007) noticed that the study aimed mainly at showing that experienced as well as inexperienced learners did not improve their performance considerably by using dictionaries during writing tests. Pupils' experience was analyzed on the basis of their answers to an open-ended question included in the final questionnaire: the students stated how frequently they used a dictionary. Yet, the kind of data collected on the basis of this question provided no information on how skillful dictionary users they actually were. It was difficult to determine to what extent the frequency of dictionary use was related to the subjects' awareness of dictionary strategies and their successful application in practice. In other words, it is rather risky to assume that a learner who frequently uses dictionaries is simultaneously capable of doing it effectively. Therefore, what needs to be analyzed in the future, as recommended by East (2007), is the correlation between pupils' dictionary use training and their test performance.

East's study (2007) also explored learners' beliefs on dictionary use in writing exams. Whereas the majority of the subjects noticed that dictionaries facilitated the look-up process in the case of unknown words or some grammatical and spelling problems, for many test takers using dictionaries seemed excessively time-consuming. Some students regarded dictionary availability during timed tests as unfair since they believed they distracted the raters' attention from learners' knowledge.

5. Concluding remarks

The selected literature discussed in this paper has shown that dictionary skills play a vital role in learning, teaching and testing in L2 classrooms. Owing to the studies carried out in recent years the complexity of the look-up process and the importance of dictionary skills training for L2 learners have been further explored. Unfortunately, this knowledge has not been effectively applied in practice so far. Teachers' and students' erroneous assumptions about the look-up process often lead to the avoidance or ineffective use of dictionaries in language learning. Also, there is a problem of the lack of appropriate skills training which deprives pupils of the chance to become active and autonomous dictionary users. Finally, the issue of dictionary consultation during writing tests has not yet been fully clarified because of contradictory opinions among the experts in testing. To convince the opponents of allowing dictionaries in examinations among not only specialists but also teachers and surprisingly learners, as the study by East (2007) has shown, more research is needed in the future.

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