

Effective Use of English Language Dictionaries in Advanced Proficiency in ESL Classes

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Introduction

Just as language learning strategies, theories, and techniques develop, the availability of reference materials that can assist English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners also increase. These reference material development companies, specifically makers of dictionaries are creating and updating general dictionaries for English L1 learners, as well as starting to develop new dictionaries that are aimed towards the ESL or EFL learner context, hoping to provide easy to navigate monolingual dictionaries that aim to provide ESL or EFL learners with a superior reference material to aid in their developing language academia.

The language institute that I work at in a university emphasizes to the students that relying on a translator for students' mother tongues to provide them with English lexicon will indeed provide them with a quick "go to" to pick up a word that they do not know, but overall may not help them understand the word, or how it is used in English vernacular or syntactical structures. As learners of English start to produce longer sentences using a variety of structure, they should press to move away or restrict themselves from relying on their L1-English translator and begin to utilize monolingual English materials, or to work through context to aid in their acquisition of English language.

Context

In Hawai'i, there has been a strong focus on providing superior English language education for students coming to study, whether nationally or from abroad. Hawai'i is sad to be one of the largest melting pots of the world, bringing culture and languages together from all

over the world. This case study is based off of observations conducted in the United States, at the Language Institute at the University of Hawai'i.

The Language Institute offers intensive ESL classes in 7-week sessions, with the length of instruction reaching up to 18 hours per week. The classes focus on skills such as pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, and culture, and run from Monday through Thursday. The classes are aimed, created, and developed for Adult ESL learners, and have a maximum class size of 16 students to ensure that each student receives some individual attention in the 1 hour 20 minute class sessions. The level of proficiency for the students is designated by the institution, after going through a diagnostic test and interview. Students are then placed in 1 of 3 levels: Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced. For this study, we will look at the advanced group of ESL learners.

Problem

Students at the advanced level of English at the institute are looking to bridge into the college credit program at the university. However, one of the biggest problems I have noticed is that this group relies on English bilingual resources such as the dictionaries and translators that students bring from their home countries, or that they find in the local area. Often, when students look for a word in their L1 to answer a question in L2, they are using words that they would use to describe the situation in their language context, but is different than how L1 speakers of English would use it in the United States.

Although the institute provides ESL/EFL specific dictionaries for students to refer to, they are found to be deficient in the skills necessary to gain full value of the resource (Chan, 2005). Studies by Chan (2011), Nesi and Meara (1994), as well as Christianson (1997), have shown that ESL learners often lack the understanding of how the information the dictionary

presents relate to their words, and “do not take the time to consult dictionaries when needed” (Christianson, 1997). This is a problem that has arisen occasionally at my worksite and I have noticed that this also takes up extra minutes of class time unnecessarily to provide students extra time to search up words. It is a continuous cycle: Hear or read an unknown word, look it up in a translator, understand the word in their L1, but not able to put meaning to the word in English. It is not the lesson that becomes the focus, but the dictionary. Chan (2011) further expands on this idea, stating that “L2 learners find it hard to know all the meanings of a polysemous word, and they often do not have the sensitivity to realize the categorization or subtle distinctions of its many senses”. I have found that students have difficulties in abandoning familiar meanings of words, and it will show when they incorrectly interpret meanings because the definition they used for a word did not make sense in context.

Solution

There are a few strategies that the teacher can utilize to make more effective use of time and dictionary use in the classroom. As advanced learners of English, these learners should already be adept with the conventions of English vernacular, and should be, when applicable, consulting a monolingual English dictionary only when needed. The teacher should work towards having students understand the target language’s vocabulary through context, and consult the dictionary for vocabulary that students cannot understand from the context. In the case that this should happen, there should first be some self-sufficiency happening in the classroom, where peers should be responding to the student who is having a hard time with a word and try to provide a definition for the student.

Another probable solution to this problem would be to invest students in a dictionary usage lesson. Tibbetts in Richards (1998), expresses that providing students with a lesson on

dictionary practice with meaningful context is a way to enhance students' confidence and motivation in selecting the dictionary as a resource in place of the bilingual dictionaries that students from abroad are so accustomed to.

As far as the use of monolingual English dictionaries go, if teachers of ESL or EFL are able to integrate these trainings into the curriculum for the students, this could indeed improve student motivation and desire to consult the English language dictionary. Chan (2011) cites Lew and Galas (2008), stating that "Dictionary skills training is effective in educating users to use dictionaries more efficiently, and efficient use of dictionaries is vital to advanced learners, as they are the ones who rely most on self-access materials for self-learning". Thus, having a dictionary usage lesson could increase students' awareness of all the polysemy that happens in English that makes learning vocabulary extremely difficult, and will have learners needing to work with context. For example, the word love is polysemous that always arises in my class. The biggest misconception that this word has is the idea of romantic love or enjoyment, but when it is brought up in the idea of sports, such as tennis, the term "Love-All" makes no sense to learners and only those within that discourse would understand the expression. The teacher could teach students how to 'skim and scan' by providing questions that will test the students' ability to find words that are compounds, irregular verbs, etc..

Conclusion

Utilizing monolingual English dictionaries in advanced English language classes is an asset that will help in the development of these advanced learners. Relying on a bilingual English dictionary or translator may be a great tool for easy searching and relatability to a learner's mother tongue, but will impede on the progress to learn and fossilize correct vocabulary and definitions of newly learned lexicon. I have expressed solutions that will have both teacher

and student learning about what works and what may not, and will help each party understand why monolingual dictionaries are a useful tool to promoting English language education in advanced levels of ESL or EFL contexts. This is not only a skill that is useful for the class, but will also be an asset that L2 English learners will hold under their belt when they make the decision to leap into credit courses at universities and attain higher levels of education in English language dominant institutions.

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