(39)   Dictionary training

How to help students get the most out of their dictionaries

Language focus	Vocabulary
Duration	20 mins
Materials	As many different types of dictionaries as possible. See Step 4.

Introduction

People do not learn languages without dictionaries. Students need good dictionaries and they need good training in using them.

There are many types of dictionaries. A top-level categorisation is their intended user: native speakers and non-native speakers. Some dictionaries are monolingual while others are bilingual or even multilingual; hybrid dictionaries mix features of mono and bilingual. There are dictionaries based on linguistic features such phrasal verbs, rhyming, slang, idiom, pronunciation, etc. And some are topic or field based such as medical, aeronautical, philosophy, military, etc. There are dictionaries based on pictures. And we have paper and electronic dictionaries. Some dictionaries are written by a specialist or small team, some are written by teams of lexicographers employed by large publishers, while others are crowd sourced.

Learner dictionaries became a major growth industry in the 1980s once the COBUILD Dictionary was published. The COBUILD was in no way the first dictionary for language learners, but the innovations in that dictionary had a big impact on the ELT publishing industry and on language learning. The name is an acronym: Collins Birmingham University International Language Database. For *database,* read corpus. The online version is at collinsdictionary.com.

The information that a dictionary entry provides depends on the type of dictionary. For example, a monolingual dictionary written for native speakers does not usually need pronunciation or full sentence definitions. A bilingual dictionary does not need definitions. A monolingual learner dictionary for elementary students will rely on a very limited defining vocabulary.

Students need to get the most out of their dictionaries. Teachers can lead them on a guided tour showing them the highlights and discussing the value of each

feature. Or they can set students out on their own discovery tour, enhancing their skill set.

Procedure

Step 1.   Hold up several different dictionaries. Ask the students to name or identify them. Someone can write the dictionary titles on the board.

Step 2.   Ask the students for a few features of each type. This is quite likely something that they didn't know they knew. Prompt them with a few ideas if necessary, e.g., Which one is written for specialists in economics? Which ones are especially useful to students of English?

Step 3.   Elicit features such as definition, examples, synonyms, pronunciation, etc. Make a list or spray diagram on the board.

Step 4.   Put the students in groups and give each group three different dictionaries, or copies of pages from different dictionaries, including some printouts from online dictionaries and screenshots from apps.

Step 5.   Ask them to compare their dictionaries using the features. They might do this in a table format or as a Venn diagram (p.169).

Step 6.   The students present their comparisons, perhaps as a little presentation to the class.

Note: If necessary, provide them with functional language for expressing comparisons.

Follow up writing task

A writing task: "Dictionaries – the good, the bad and the ..."

Students write a comparison of two or three dictionaries providing the factual information that was in their tables or diagrams as well as their personal opinions about the features, and what the dictionaries mean to them. They can conclude with their preferred dictionary.

This task can be set as homework. And it could be a group writing task. Students can submit a draft for comments and submit a final version later. See Feedback and feed forward in the index.