

Dictionaries as a teaching resource

An extract from *Dictionaries*, part of the *Resource Books for Teachers* series, by Jonathan Wright. They can serve as a focus for communication and classroom interaction, and a means of exploring personal preferences in learning styles. They naturally generate a great deal of thinking about meaning. There is no reason why dictionary activities should not be used as a basis for discussion, debate, role-play, or many other language activities. Instead of just referring back to dictionaries to solve problems of meaning encountered in texts or listening comprehension exercises, we can make the dictionary itself a primary source of interaction. Instead of being a book consulted in private, or largely for individual learning problems, it can become a springboard to all sorts of other communicative activities. By exploiting dictionaries as a source of interaction, we can help students develop their confidence as dictionary users, and an important spin-off is that students are exposed to a great deal of language data that will help them experience and explore the language as a system. Teachers benefit as students develop better dictionary skills. Dictionaries provide an extra source of information in the classroom and add variety to lessons. They can provide useful support - not simply when you are in doubt about something but when you want students to confirm their own suppositions about an aspect of English. While students are working with dictionaries their focus is on learning, not on you, which allows you more time to provide individual guidance and support. It is important that your students use a dictionary which is suitable for their level - beginners will only be frustrated if they try to make sense of an advanced learner's dictionary; similarly, advanced learners will not derive great benefit from working with an elementary dictionary. In most cases, it does not matter if the students are using different editions, because there are valuable insights to be gained from comparing and contrasting different dictionaries.

Different types of dictionaries

There are many different types of dictionaries and one of the first choices learners make when they start learning a new language is which dictionary to buy. Not surprisingly, accessibility, cost, and size are important factors. There are many arguments in favor of small bilingual dictionaries - they are generally cheap, they offer the support of translation into the mother tongue, and they are readily available. They can also be a cause of confusion, as demands of space result in drastic simplification. It is quite common for even large bilingual dictionaries to give a list of possible translations for verbs such as *go*, *take*, or *make*, with little information about which meaning applies in which context. Or perhaps they suggest a single translation, which can be even more misleading. Sometimes there is no guidance about the pronunciation of the word, or the grammatical patterns it operates in, and idiomatic expressions may not feature at all. At

the other end of the scale is the monolingual dictionary designed for native speakers; these can be vast, authoritative tomes which reflect the history and culture of the language, with information about when and where each word was first coined, its etymology, examples of use in literature, and so on. They are usually works of great scholarship which set out to be definitive works of reference, often including many thousands of words and their variants no longer in current use. This, when combined with their size and cost, generally means that they are not the most appropriate choice for foreign learners of English. Between these two extremes are the monolingual dictionaries for foreign students, often called learner's dictionaries, which teachers often prefer students to use? These are often aimed at a specific language level and may also target specific age groups: there are children's and junior dictionaries for younger learners, elementary dictionaries, and dictionaries aimed at intermediate and advanced learners. The most important differences are in the number of words they set out to explain and define - the headwords - which can range from a few thousand for beginners to 80-100,000 words and expressions in the case of advanced learner's dictionaries. In addition, the language of definitions and explanations is tailored to the level of the learners. All good dictionaries use a much reduced defining vocabulary so that when students look up words, the language of the explanation itself is as simple and transparent as possible. Dictionaries at lower levels naturally tend to have more illustrations and the presentation of the grammatical information is simpler. Another sort of learner's dictionary is the specialist dictionary aimed at professionals or students with a strong interest in a professional field such as medicine or business, where the focus is on key terms too specific for general learner's dictionaries. There are also dictionaries where words are categorized by topic - one version is the popular pictorial or visual dictionary. The electronic dictionary is becoming increasingly popular. The hand-held versions offer many of the advantages of modern technology - they contain a great deal of information, can make use of sound, and can perform searches and other scanning operations much faster than we can turn pages. More powerful versions are the dictionaries on CD-ROM which are becoming a standard feature of many institutions, and which will doubtless become increasingly popular as they develop their full potential.

Related Title

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