

SOFTWARE REVIEWS

MACMILLAN ENGLISH DICTIONARY AND CAMBRIDGE LEARNER'S DICTIONARY - A COMPARATIVE REVIEW

System requirements:

	<i>Macmillan English Dictionary</i>	<i>Cambridge Learner's Dictionary</i>
Platform	IBM-compatible PC	IBM-compatible PC
CPU	Minimum Pentium 133 MHz	Minimum Pentium 166 MHz
RAM memory	32 MB	32 MB
Hard disc space	120 MB available (560 MB for full installation)	20 MB available
Operating system	Windows 98, 2000, NT4, ME	Windows 95, 98, 2000, NT4, ME
Sound card	16-bit Windows-compatible sound card	Soundblaster-compatible sound card
Graphic card	DirectX-compatible, 16-bit colour, supporting 800x600 resolution or higher	Super VGA, 16-bit colour or higher supporting 800x600 resolution or higher
Others	Speakers or headphones, microphone, Microsoft-compatible mouse or a pointing device	Speakers or headphones, a mouse or a compatible pointing device

Description

Macmillan English Dictionary is a program for upper-level students, a comprehensive dictionary containing over 100,000 references, with 30,000 idioms and phrases, produced by a team of 100 lexicographers studying the corpus of 200 million words to provide up-to-date and accurate information on words, their forms, meanings and uses. The dictionary, apart from giving all these in traditional entries, provides also pronunciation practice, allows quick access to words while working in other applications. MED makes it possible to choose the window size, find a word, check the spelling while writing, listen to the pronunciation of a word, find a word using another program, build one's vocabulary and add one's own note to a word. As a learning tool, it enables pronunciation practice, lets students build up their grammar knowledge by providing study pages, gives easier access to meanings by illustrated words, and facilitates learning words by adding them to personal wordlists. As for teachers,

they are able to teach words using illustrations, create teacher-made wordlists, and print their own vocabulary lessons.

Cambridge Learner's Dictionary (CLD) on CD-ROM is an interactive electronic dictionary for intermediate learners of English. Its entries contain sound recordings by both British and American native speakers, as well as a feature that lets you record and hear your own pronunciation. CLD also has a 'Related Words' feature that works like a thesaurus, and a 'Word Families' feature that provides an easy way to build your vocabulary. In addition, CLD has a number of study pages, which explore different areas of English language and culture, and interactive exercises based on the study pages, which help the user practise the learnt words. CLD is combined with an application called Bookcase, a software program that helps use CLD and is automatically installed on the computer when installing CLD. What is more, the dictionary consists also of a picture component, as well as vocabulary exercises. It enables copying, printing, annotating entries, as well as simple and advanced searches.

General considerations

MED is said to be directed for advanced learners, but when looking at the defining vocabulary it seems that intermediate and upper-intermediate students could profitably use the tool as well. It is widely accessible through Macmillan ELT representatives all over the country, as well as in language bookshops. There are separate British English and American English versions, created from the same language database, but differing in vocabulary, contexts, spelling styles, punctuation and phraseology.

In comparison to MED, CLD claims to be directed to intermediate learners of English, and probably due to this assumption the interface of the program is much simpler, there are just a few icons and no drop-down menus, most probably not to overwhelm the user with a multitude of instructions in the target language. The authors of the program are consistent in this respect, and the defining vocabulary, icons, instructions, examples seem to be suited to that language level. However, this does not mean that more advanced learners would not benefit from the product - on the contrary, CLD is especially useful in building up learner's vocabulary, also on more advanced level, due to its sophisticated mechanism of providing related words. CLD is equally widely available, however, no mention is made of separate BE and AmE versions - it is only the pronunciation files that reflect this distinction.

Entries

MED entries contain the following pieces of information: the word, phonetic transcript, the icon to play back its pronunciation, the category of the word (noun, verb etc.), countable/uncountable, transitive/intransitive, definition of a word in its different meanings, example sentences, idioms/fixed phrases the word is used in, finally the words derived from it. Once the word is typed in, the dictionary searches automatically for other expressions it appears in, so the learner may research the dictionary contents in this way. Some words have also usage notes, as is the case of 'should', where the difference between 'should' and 'would' is focused on. The novelty is frequency information, expressed in the form of stars next to the word, with three stars denoting the highest frequency down to no stars at all. Thanks to that feature, students can get the idea of which words should become their productive vocabulary, and which could remain receptive only. One thing missing in the entries of MED is the lack of related words option, which would enable the user to research the dictionary contents for words of similar meaning or relating to the same language area.

The entries in CLD are fairly similar, and the following information can be found there: the word, its BE and AmE pronunciations to be played, the phonetic transcript, definition, example, word category, countability/uncountability, varieties of the word in case of AmE. When a word has a number of meanings, these are preceded by guidewords, telling the user what the general area/category of the meaning is, in this way providing faster access to particular meanings of words. In case of certain words, the definition also includes usage notes, giving some basic information on how to use the word. There is no frequency information, but some words are preceded by a "key" icon, which symbolises the importance of the word to learn.

Searching

It must be said that MED has well-developed and advanced searching capabilities. As was said before, the dictionary automatically searches its contents for the phrases with the word requested, the list of which is given in the box at the bottom of the screen. Another search option is using "WordSearch", which makes it possible to look for a given word, specifying whether it is a headword, derived word, compound, phrasal verb, phrase or collocation. If that does not work, the user may try "TextSearch", looking for some text in definitions, examples or editorial notes. Another search facility, "SmartSearch", enables searching using AND, OR, NOT operators, applying at the same time the following filters: part of speech, grammar, region, style, frequency, irregular inflection, defining vocabulary, number of senses, illustration, menu, summary and editorial notes. The final feature of the program is

"SoundSearch", a complete novelty in electronic dictionaries, where a student can type in the pronunciation of the word (or choose the phonetic symbols from the list) to get the requested words. The possibility of using wildcards (putting in ? or * for one or more symbols) makes it possible to work on minimal pairs, homophones, homonyms.

CLD has two windows, one being the Search Panel, the other the Content Window. In order to find a word, the user types in the word in the search box and clicks "Find". Under the typing box, there is the list of all words from the dictionary, which changes according to the letters typed in. The search results are visible in the box under the typing box, and are displayed in the following order: headwords, phrasal verbs, idioms and phrases, usage notes, definitions and examples, all colour coded. Thus, the user gets the instant access not only to the headword, but to all instances of the use of the word in the dictionary, which is especially useful when trying to look up idioms or do research on the meaning and applications of particular words. When searching, one can use the following filters: category, part of speech, grammar label, usage label, UK/US label, keyword, in order to further refine the search. Once any of the filters is chosen, then the user must make further choices as for the specific part of speech etc. CLD has a well-developed "Related words" search engine, which can be accessed either from the entry for any word (by clicking on "Related words") or as one of the filters in search box. By clicking on "Related words" in the dictionary, one gets a list of words that belong to the same category (in case of oxygen, it was "Chemistry - Chemical elements"), which is automatically detected by the dictionary. It is possible also to use that feature manually, by specifying the category and subcategory one wants to research. The well-developed "Related words" option makes this dictionary especially suitable for learning vocabulary in a given field. However, more advanced users would certainly miss advanced search with Boolean operators, or search by giving the pronunciation of a word.

Dictionary components

As said before, MED has the basic A-Z component, with alphabetic list of entries, definitions, examples, pronunciation recordings and usage notes. Apart from that, there is the illustrations component, where some words are explained with pictures. The words appearing in the picture are given in the box below, and by moving the mouse over the picture one can see the words and get their meanings. Thus, it is not only easier to understand some words, but learners can acquire new words in meaningful contexts by associating an object with a word.

Also, the dictionary features study pages, where learners can find detailed information on the dictionary (foreword, introduction, using the dictionary, grammar codes, labels,

pronunciation, defining vocabulary, irregular verbs), as well as build their knowledge of the language in general by reading about numbers, phrasal verbs, academic writing, metaphor, computer words, pragmatics, spoken discourse, business English or word formation. What is more, the dictionary encompasses a mini-atlas, with general maps of continents and countries. The final component of MED are wordlists, where a user can add words in given categories, add notes to them, print the list or use flashcards vocabulary practice.

The basic part of CLD is A-Z, where the entries for words are displayed, with definitions, examples, pronunciation, usage notes, etc. Another component of the dictionary is exercises, where the user can practice grammar and vocabulary in drag-and-drop and multiple-choice exercises. The areas covered are adjectives, countability, idioms, irregular verbs, phrasal verbs, prefixes, suffixes, verb patterns. There are also picture exercises, consisting in dragging words from the list onto the objects in the picture. While doing the exercise, the user's score is kept, and it is possible to see the score, see the current answer, all answers, go to the relevant study page in the dictionary, clear the answers or go to the next exercise. It must be said that especially picture exercises are an interesting and effective way of learning and revising vocabulary, and thanks to the user identification and scorekeeping features it is possible to assess one's progress.

The other component of the program is a picture dictionary, where one can move the mouse over the picture to see the words appearing in it, and click to go to the entry of the word. Finally, the dictionary features "Study pages" section, with such parts as acknowledgements, appendices (irregular verbs, regular verb tenses, word beginnings and endings, word building, pronunciation symbols, using the dictionary) and study pages (checking work, classroom language, collocations, countable/uncountable nouns, email, formal letters, idioms, gradable and limit adjectives, informal letters, the Internet, measurements, modal verbs, numbers and dates, order of adjectives, phrasal verbs, prefixes, pronunciation, punctuation, spelling, suffixes, UK/US English, verb patterns). There one can read about some of the important aspects of language and do the exercises.

Working with the dictionary

MED, just as most Machine-Readable Dictionaries on the market, allow the following operations: copying an entry, printing an entry, adding a note to an entry (annotating entries) and, unlike other dictionaries, adding a word to one's wordlist, in order to practice a list of words later on. Also, it is possible to play back the British English and the American English

pronunciation of each word, as well as practice it by recording your pronunciation and listening back to it.

As for CLD, it is possible to find a word, listen to its BE and AmE pronunciation, practise it by recording oneself and playing back, copy the entry or example, copy it directly to a word-processor, print the entry or part of it (by highlighting the piece of text to be printed), annotate an entry, and use back and forward buttons or the history list. The Search Panel allows the user to work with annotations, namely view them, search for a word in the annotations, change and delete them.

Integrating the dictionary with other programs

Nowadays, it is becoming more and more important for a dictionary to be flexible and integratable with other Windows programs, in order to save the time and allow the user to get the definition without having to switch to the dictionary and type a word in. As for MED, it has various possibilities for such a mode of work. If the dictionary is open alongside the word-processor, simply moving the mouse pointer to any word in a word-processor text makes the dictionary display that entry. However, in order to make that possible, both programs can't be maximized, which may not be very comfortable for the user. Thus, another chance is to use the "QuickSearch" display mode, which is a small window staying always on top of other programs. Then, you do not have to switch to the dictionary window or run the word-processor minimized, and by moving the mouse pointer on any word in the text makes MED give its definition. This is the same in programs without cursor, such as an Internet browser, where positioning the mouse pointer on the word makes the dictionary give its definition in an instant. It must be said that this way of integrating the dictionary with all Windows programs is as simple as it can be. Pointing a word with a mouse pointer and getting its definition - can it be easier?

In order to use CLD with other Windows applications, the user has two options: either follow the full installation procedure, install a special program called "Bookcase", when it will be possible to double-click a word and press Ctrl + 9 in order to get a lookup window with the word entry. If Bookcase has not been installed, then it is still possible to get instant access to the dictionary content (called "HotKey") following the same procedure of highlighting the word and clicking Ctrl + 9, but this time the dictionary must be working in the background. This way of providing instant lookup, though certainly not very difficult, is definitely less fast than just moving the mouse pointer to a word, as was the case with MED.

Another way of using CLD with other programs is to integrate it with a word-processor, so that after having pressed a relevant icon the highlighted piece of text will be automatically pasted to a word-processor document, which must be active in the background. In order to do it, one must integrate the word-processor with the dictionary using the Bookcase. However, I have tried to do it numerous times, and for some unknown reason I was unable to do it.

Interface and mode of use

As for MED, it has a clear, uncluttered interface, with tasteful colour combinations dominated by red. The program screen is divided into a few boxes: the biggest one in the centre is where the entries are displayed. To the right of it, there is the place for usage notes and user notes to appear. To the left of it, there is a small box at the top where the desired word is typed in, under it there is the alphabetic list of all words of the dictionary, and under it there is the last box, where the results of a search for a desired word in phrases is displayed. On the top of the screen, just as in most Windows applications, there is the list of drop-down menus (View, Edit, Pronunciation, SmartSearch, SoundSearch, History, Options, Help, Quick/Full switch). While clicking on these, the user gets a list of commands enabled in a given menu. The requested word opens in the central window, and scrolling it up and down one can get through previous or next entries. All the words accessed before can be quickly recovered from the History menu. The creators of the dictionary decided not to use icons, and instead gave text instructions everywhere in the program, which seems to be a good idea, having in mind that icons can be interpreted differently.

CLD has a very simple and intuitive interface, with the dictionary divided into two windows. One is the Search Panel, where the user types in a word, chooses a word from a list of words, uses filters to search the entire contents of the dictionary. From the Search Panel the user can access also the website of Cambridge dictionaries and the user annotations. The main dictionary window opens next to the Search Panel window, and on the top of it there are a few icons giving access to the options, as well as the underlined hyperlinks to exercises, pictures, study pages or related words. The program is directed to intermediate users, and consequently the program is much easier to use, the icons are the same as in other applications. The user does not have to look through the program to find the desired option mainly due to the fact that the dictionary is much simpler than MED.

Ease of use and reliability of operation

MED is easy to install and uninstall. It does not have heavy hardware requirements, so it does not take too much for it to load or look up a word. No crashes have been observed, and it did not cause any malfunctioning of the system. It is quite flexible in use also in that while installing the program the user can choose the 'Normal' installation, copying all the disc contents but the sound files to the hard disc, and requiring the disc in the CD-ROM drive for use; or 'Full' installation, copying the entire contents of MED to the hard disc, making the dictionary fully functional without the CD-ROM. This demands 560 MB of hard disc space, but thanks to such a solution it might be possible to use two dictionaries alongside: a monolingual one (MED) and a bilingual one, put into the CD-ROM drive.

CLD is equally easy to install and uninstall as MED. It is reliable in its operation, does not cause any crashes or stalls. It does not take too much RAM memory when working in the background, so it is perfectly possible to use it alongside with other applications. Just as with MED, it is possible to install the program in the full version, copying all dictionary data to hard disc, and taking 96 MB hard disc space. However, in this case sound files stay on the CD-ROM, so it is still necessary to make full use of the program, and it is not possible to use another dictionary (e.g., a bilingual one) at the same time.

Assistance to the user

MED is relatively user-friendly, as it has a number of features giving assistance to the user while learning how to operate the program. Above all, the program is accompanied by a printed CD-ROM user guide, giving advice on installation, getting started, display modes and menus, notes and lists, advanced searching, study aids, printing and copying. In this way, the user can get basic information before starting the program. Another help facility is the guided tour, with onscreen animations explaining what MED is, how it is different from other MRDs, how to get started with it, how to use advanced searching options, how MED can help in teaching and learning. Next, users who are connected to the Internet can use online guide. Finally, there is a dedicated dictionary website (<http://www.macmillandictionary.com>), containing further information, tips of advice and ideas for use in the classroom. Thus, it seems that no user should have any problems with making the most of MED, due to such extensive and varied set of help tools.

As for CLD, it is intuitive and easy to use enough, and most probably because of that it does not have such elaborate help facilities as a guided tour or online help. It also has a printed User's Guide, with the most important aspects of working with the dictionary explained in

simple instructions accompanied by pictures. As in case of most programs, CLD has a Help facility, where all features of the program are explained, such as how to get started, how to search for a word using the search panel, how to use the content window, launch and quit the program, copy and print, use exercises, study pages or the picture component. Another way of getting assistance in using the dictionary is to consult the study pages, where the explanations of grammar labels, pronunciation, regular inflections, usage labels and UK/US labels are given. It seems that taking into account the fact that CLD is a simple program without many advanced options, the above ways of providing help are enough.

Customising the dictionary

The key to using MRDs by students and teachers is finding the ways to subject the tool to the people's needs, rather than using the tool as it allows to be used. Usually, commercial-made dictionaries give little possibilities for being customized. In the case of MED, there are two options making it possible for the user to suit the tool to his/her needs. One is the possibility of creating wordlists, namely adding selected words to custom-made categories, adding notes to them, then checking one's retention by reviewing the wordlist, going to selected entries, and reviewing the notes. Wordlists are flexible enough in that they allow adding new words, deleting them, printing the entire wordlist, renaming it. Another way of customizing the dictionary is to add one's own comments to the entries, which are displayed to the right of the entry proper. However, as is the case with other MRDs, it is not possible to input one's own words or to update the dictionary in any way (e.g., via the Internet).

CLD is even less flexible for the user to adapt it to his/her needs. Although it is possible to use the options menu to change the layout of the dictionary, the possibilities available are fairly limited: it is possible only to display phonetics, UK/US sound icons, grammar labels, irregular inflections, related words, word families. As usually the user of the dictionary needs all of the above features, then the user does not get much help here. In fact, the only way of making the dictionary work to your purposes is to use the annotations, and add your own notes to the selected words. Then it will be possible to quickly retrieve them using the annotations button in the Search Panel, but nothing else is possible. It is not possible to add your own words, nor to update the dictionary in any way. In contrast with MED, it is not even possible to create wordlists or practice selected words in any ways. Thus, it seems that in the future software manufacturers could think about providing such tools which could allow greater customisation of MRDs.

Practising the retention of words

As noticed by Sobkowiak (2002), electronic dictionaries stop being dictionaries only, and become more and more versatile tools, encompassing also grammar reference and vocabulary exercises. Indeed, most MRDs available on the market make it possible for the user to test the retention of selected words in exercises or games of various kinds. It must be said that MED is quite poor in this respect, and the only kind of exercise that it allows is practicing the words from a wordlist in a 'Flashcard' game. Here, the user may choose to see a headword only, the entry without a headword, a note or a note and an entry without a headword. Especially option 2 and 4 (with headwords hidden) seem to be quite good for vocabulary practice, but this could be better developed by adding scoring, feedback or multiple choice answers.

As was noted before, CLD has an exercises component, divided into study pages exercises and picture exercises. The tasks are mainly of drag-and-drop or type-in kinds, and the user can do the exercise, see the current answer, see all the answers, go to the reference material (word entry, a picture or a study page). Thanks to the options of user identification and score keeping, the exercise component of the dictionary can be used by many students, e.g., in a school computer lab. What should be especially noted here is the existence of picture exercises, thanks to which the user can practise the retention of words starting from the picture. However, what seems to be missing about the exercise component of CLD is the lack of exercises testing the knowledge of words defined by the user, which would be extremely helpful when learning vocabulary from some coursebook.

Recommendation

On the whole, it must be said that *Macmillan English Dictionary* is an extremely well-developed machine-readable dictionary. Its strongest sides are probably advanced searching capabilities (word, text, complex text and sound search), easy and quick integration with all other Windows programs, great amount of information included in the dictionary, and frequency hints as based on the corpus counts, the existence of separate British English and American English editions and informative and helpful assistance tools. However, when developing future versions of the dictionary its manufacturers could consider releasing also a Mac version, including more vocabulary games and exercises of different types, as well as the possibility of Internet update. Also, another area where some improvement could be made is crossreferencing and linking words to related words, so that the user could start with some word and make lexical research into other words in the given thematic area.

When summing up CDL, it can be said that it is an intuitive, easy-to-use dictionary for intermediate learners, providing immediate access to the required language information, definitions, examples, BE and AmE pronunciation, usage notes and many more. Because the program is directed to intermediate learners, it does not have very sophisticated options, and could be enhanced with more advanced searching options and the feature of creating wordlists. The program is highly recommended because of the well-developed related words engine, which automatically detects the lexical category of the word and searches for other related words. In this way, the dictionary is especially suitable for students doing thematic research. Thus, it seems that the program is most suitable for lower level students because of its ease of use and intuitive icons, but it can be also profitably used by more advanced users.

Reference

Sobkowiak, W. (2002) "The Challenge of Electronic Learners' Dictionaries". *Teaching English with Technology*, vol. 2, no. 1, <http://www.iatefl.org.pl/call/callnl.htm>.