Dictionary Use as Word Solving Strategy (WSS)

Doc.Dr. Jusuf Mustafai, PhD
Faculty of Islamic Studies, Skopje, Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)

Abstract

L2 learners may try to pick up the unknown word's meaning from a dictionary. Many different factors, such as how important the meaning of the word is in the passage, the number of unknown words, and the reason the students are working on it, etc., affect the frequency of the student's use of the dictionary for help. However, trying to guess the meaning of the unknown word from the context before consulting a dictionary is more beneficial since this may help the learners to pick the correct meaning relevant to the text. Using a dictionary should be limited to those unguessable words whose meanings can hinder the learner's understanding.

Keywords: dictionary; strategy; vocabulary; research; study; word

When learners learn new words, they may encounter unknown or unguessable words; s/he may turn to the dictionary as a last resort for help. Furthermore, most people only use a dictionary to find the meaning of a word. Similarly, Hosenfeld (1977: 121) summarises:

> "It is not that successful readers never look up words in a glossary. They do but only after more efficient strategies have failed. A distinguishing characteristic of successful and non-successful readers is the priority system of their word solving strategies: while looking up words in a glossary or dictionary is a non-successful reader's first and most frequent response, it is a successful reader's last and most infrequent response to unknown words.[1]"

This is consistent with Scholfield (1999) and Nation (1990), who propose that guessing from the context needs to be the first step before consulting the dictionary in order to be able to pick up the appropriate meaning. Knight (1994), for example, discovered that while incidental vocabulary learning through contextual guessing did take place, those who used a dictionary as well as guessing through context not only learned more words immediately after reading but also remembered more after two weeks. She also found that low verbal ability participants benefited more from the dictionary than high verbal ability participants who, in turn, benefited more from contextual guessing. Another interesting point that Knight found out was that high verbal ability students would look up a word even if they had successfully guessed its meaning.

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[1] Hosenfeld1977. A preliminary investigation of the reading strategies of successful and nonsuccessful second language learners. *System*, C., 5:2, 110-123.

Further, Hulstijn (1993) suggests that it is not the case that students with greater guessing ability use the dictionary less than those with lesser guessing ability. In other words, he argues that the importance of the word in the text affects the learner's choice, not his or her ability to guess.

Dictionary-use strategies.

The dictionary as one of the Word Solving Strategies is a part of Vocabulary Learning Strategies. Dictionaries can help learners to understand the text and learn the vocabulary. (Nation, 2001). However, it should be cautioned here that we do not restrict the use of dictionaries as belonging only to WAS (**W**ord **A**ttack **S**trategy). Rather we use the term 'dictionary-use strategies' to refer to the type of dictionary the L2 learners use receptively and productively, the kind of information they check in a dictionary, the characteristic features of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries, and the wider purposes the L2 learners have in using the dictionary. We intend to highlight all these. To put it more simply, dictionaries provide not only the meaning of a particular word, which is the focus in WSS use, but also its pronunciation which will often be shown in phonetic script after the word, it's part of speech, its syntactic behaviour, etc. Further, a good dictionary can tell much more about the spelling of a word and can provide its possible alternative spellings (for example, *judgment* and *judgement* are correct alternative spellings) and possible examples, which will help learners to understand how to use a word. All this is potentially valuable for learning new words, although dictionary use is a part of word study.

Choice of dictionary types

Looking at the characteristic features of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries in relevant literature (e.g. in dictionary catalogues) shows that, when it comes to the choice among/of dictionaries, studies such as those by Tomaszczyk (1979), Atkins (as cited in Laufer and Hadar, 1997), Schmitt (1997), and Laufer (1997) show that the majority of L2 learners, even those who have achieved a good level of L2 proficiency, use bilingual dictionaries more frequently than monolingual dictionaries, The learners of the low-proficiency level may do so because bilingual dictionaries are good for them in spite of their weakness, and they may feel insecure about using a monolingual dictionary because their L2 knowledge may not allow them to use it.

The reason for this may be that bilingual dictionaries are easier to use, in that the meaning of unknown L2 words can be accessed via L1 (Scholfield, 1982[2]).

According to Stein (1989) the use of a bilingual dictionary for comprehension is effective because it 'provides general understanding' for certain kinds of words, such as the

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[2] Scholfield, P. (1982). Using the English dictionary for comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 185-194

names of animals, cultural institutions, technical and scientific terms. She also claims that the use of bilingual dictionaries is effective because they provide 'ready translation equivalents' for common words, and 'exact translation equivalents' for institutional, technical and scientific terms.

Bilingual dictionaries enable students to understand the meaning of the word in a quick consultation and almost effortlessly, as well as being more helpful, especially with low proficiency learners. Thompson (1987:286[3]) argued against monolingual dictionaries and supported the development of "a new generation of learners' bilingual dictionaries." He pointed out that monolingual dictionaries tend to be circular in their definitions, e.g., *laugh, amuse, amusement* and *humour* are normally used in each others definitions. Even if vocabulary definitions are restricted, monolingual dictionaries still "employ a special register which is not necessarily the most useful or rewarding for learners to be exposed to" (p. 284), and they are therefore of little value to foreign language learners below the advanced level.

However, Laufer (1997) claims that the majority use of the bilingual dictionary does not necessary mean that it is more helpful. In other words, just as using bilingual dictionaries has advantages, there are drawbacks or shortcomings in using them as well. For example, an old argument against the use of bilingual dictionaries is that they do not help L2 learners to think in the target language, or they tend to foster, in L2 learners, a tendency to always understand L2 words by translating them into L1 (Stein 1989, Scholfield 1995). Bilingual dictionaries also provide more than one L1/L2 equivalent for an apparently corresponding L2/L1 word, which might cause a problem. This is the case especially with beginners who are likely to be confused by undifferentiated lists of translation equivalents, and so they find themselves unable to select an appropriate equivalent for the given text, unlike the intermediate or advanced learners who have a certain command of the target language (Stein 1989).

Intermediate and high school Albanian EFL learners use a pocket bilingual dictionary more than a monolingual one because of its light weight, or because they find it more feasible. However, not all of them are familiar with dictionaries because their schools do not provide them and the classroom activities do not include the use of a dictionary. The university students are more familiar with both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries as English is their major[4]. Similarly, Ahmed (1988) with subjects more like with ours found that good university students used monolingual dictionaries more and lower levels used bilingual ones.

One of the large-scale studies investigating the use of bilingual and monolingual dictionaries was conducted by Tomaszczyk (1979). He carried out a study using a questionnaire. He asked 57 questions and received the answers of 449 informants

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[3] Thompson, G. (1987). Using bilingual dictionaries. *ELT Journal*, 41, 282-286.

[4] Jusuf M. (2012), The influence of the mother language in the acquisition of English as a foreign language on Albanian students in Macedonia, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis. University of Skopje.p.87.

from L2 learners and others, including language teachers, literary and technical translators. He found that almost all subjects, regardless of their language proficiency or occupation, used bilingual dictionaries in general and L2—L1 dictionaries in particular. He also found that his subjects used bilingual dictionaries far more than monolingual dictionaries for all language skills, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation into and from L2, whereas 68 subjects, who were teachers and translators, used them for speaking and translation into and from L1. He found that most of his subjects thought that monolingual dictionaries had better and more information than the bilingual ones.[5] However, they consulted the bilingual dictionary more than the monolingual one, even though they criticized the bilingual dictionary more often.

> "Not only did the beginning and the intermediate FL learners rely on the bilingual dictionaries almost exclusively, but also secondary school and university language teachers used them more than L2 and other monolingual dictionaries, even though the latter were available to them"[6] (Tomaszczyk, p. 46).

This agrees with Bejoint (1981), Schmitt (1997), and Laufer (1997). Schmitt's (1997) finding shows that a bilingual dictionary is the most often used strategy by Japanese EFL students, irrespective of their achievement level. Further, Atkins & Knowles (1990, cited in Laufer 1997), carried out one of the most comprehensive studies including over 1000 learners in seven European countries and showed that bilingual dictionaries were used by the majority of the students (75%).

Based on the above findings, we may conclude that L2—L1 bilingual dictionaries are more frequently used than any other kind of dictionary regardless of the proficiency or level of education of the learners.

 On the other hand, the fact that the monolingual dictionary is less frequently used than the bilingual dictionary has both positive and negative characteristic features. The positive features include a comprehensive coverage of information about each L2 word, such as its precise definition and syntactic construction (Baxter 1980). Stein recommends the learner's monolingual dictionary for intermediate-level students. It could be inferred that the monolingual dictionary should be recommended for advanced learners. Baxter (1980) conducted a study of university students and he found out that only those who were English majors actually bought a monolingual dictionary. In his conclusion, Baxter recommends the use of both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries.

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[5] Unfortunately, I have not had access to Tomaszczyk's (1979) questionnaire to see if any of his questionnaire items are like ours and to see what the L1 of his respondents was. (J.M.)

[6] Tomaszczyk, J. 1979. 'Dictionaries: users and uses'. Glottodidactica vol. XII (103-119). Uniwersytet Im. Adama Mickiewicza W Poznaniu. p.46

Similarly to Baxter, Piotrowski (1989) claims that students of all levels use bilingual dictionaries, but those who are advanced use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Diab (1989) conducted a study on the use of dictionaries by Arabic-speaking nurses from Jordan. He found out that subjects used monolingual dictionaries more than bilingual ones. This disagrees with Tomaszczyk (1979) and Laufer (1997). It could be argued that they can be categorised as advanced learners and their field of study needs deep information and definitions of medical terms, which probably were not available in bilingual dictionaries.

I think all professionals need ESP with terms, deriving mainly from Latin and Greek, to be found more conveniently in monolingual dictionaries.

Further, Battenburg (1991) conducted a study in 1989 on L2 learners in the United States attending English classes. His findings about the type of dictionary used agree with Tomaszczyk's that the advanced students used monolingual dictionaries more than the less proficient, who preferred to use a bilingual one. According to this, as the higher the level of education and vocabulary knowledge, the more the monolingual dictionary is used by the students. Concerning the disadvantages of monolingual dictionaries, Thompson (1987) suggested two points from other studies, which we have already mentioned: firstly, learners cannot gain access to an L2 item when they do not know it; secondly, the use of L2 for definitions and examples may cause problems for learners. Another problem with monolingual dictionaries was raised by Nesi and Meara (1994), who showed that many adult learners systematically misinterpret dictionary entries while using monolingual dictionaries. Therefore the authors question the effectiveness of definitions in EFL dictionaries. According to Nesi and Meara (1994: 14) there are two reasons for that: firstly, "*idctionary users latch onto a part of the dictionary definition, without really understanding how it relates to the word they are looking up"*; secondly "*the dictionary entries were actually misleading given the starting point of the user[7].*"

We analysed problems that language learners have with vocabulary learning with the current monolingual dictionaries, and suggest for improvement of the dictionaries, since, this will make learning easier. Taking a similar view that the dictionary cannot solve all the learners' problems with vocabulary, Scholfield (1982) says that we are mistaken if we think that learners can open the dictionary and be provided with words to fit with the context. To avoid making mistakes, Scholfield advises the users to follow Underhill's (1980: 188) advice: *" Scan all of the definitions in the entry before deciding which the one you want is.[8]"*

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[7] Nesi, H. & Meara, P. (1994). Patterns of misinterpretation in the productive use of EFL dictionary definitions. System 22, p.46.

[8] Underhill, A. (1980). *Use your dictionary*. London: Oxford University Press.p.188

Information users check in dictionaries

What users check in dictionaries is an important aspect that needs attention, as Summers (1988:112) states:

> "How important the meaning of the word is in the passage, the number of unknown words in the passage, the reason why the student is working on it — to write an essay, for a comprehension test, as background reading — all these affect whether or not the student may turn to the dictionary for help[9]."

Similar to that, Scholfield[10] (1982,1997) has consistently distinguished between the different requirements and strategies for dictionaries which are relevant to use 'receptively', as in reading or listening, and 'productively', as in writing and speaking. In this regard, one recent and timely addition is a study of 211 ESL learners by Harvey and Yuill (1997), which mapped out (1) the reasons for dictionary use for a writing task, (2) how exactly learners used the dictionary, and (3) how successful they were in achieving their purposes. The result for reasons for dictionary use, which is the only one relevant to the present study, shows that spelling is the most common reason for a look-up followed by meaning. This can be applied to both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries, but in the case of bilingual dictionaries Scholfield (1982a: 85) suggests that an important distinction should be made between comprehension and production use of them. Regarding comprehension, this is the classification as WSS:

> "The critical information in the entries is the meaning; all other information (pronunciation, part of speech, etc.) is incidental to this one thing that the learner is seeking", whereas for production "the focus is on all the kinds of information in addition to the meaning which must be supplied to enable the learner to use a word correctly[11]."

Tomaszczyk (1979) reports his findings in the order of frequency as follows: (1) Information about established meanings of content words. (2) Information about word division and spelling. (3) Status. (4) Usage and currency of words. (5) Grammar. However, Tomaszczyk used heterogeneous groups of subjects which he classifies into students, teachers, and literature and technical translators. Battenburg (1991) found out that the primary use of a dictionary was to look up a meaning, which is related to reading more than spelling, syntactic information, pronunciation and etymology, which are related to writing.

Bejoint (1981) conducted a study using a questionnaire survey of 122 French university students of English to explore their exclusive use of monolingual dictionaries. He found that his subjects looked them up for different types of information in

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[9] Summers, D. (1988). The role of dictionaries in language learning. In R. Carter & M. McCarthy (Eds.), *Vocabulary and language teaching* (pp. 111-125). London: Longman

[10] Scholfield, P. (1982). Using the English dictionary for comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 185-194

[11] Scholfield, P. (1982). Using the English dictionary for comprehension. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, p.85.

the following order of frequency: (1) meaning – 87% of the students; (2) syntactic information – 53%; (3) synonyms – 52%; (4) spelling/pronunciation – 25%; (5) language variety – 19%; (6) etymology – 5%. He admits difficulty in comparing his results with those of Tomaszczyk because the questions were different. He suggests that his results show the same general tendencies: an overriding preoccupation with meaning for all students. Thus, it follows from the findings above that dictionaries, whether they are bilingual or monolingual, are used principally for searching for the meaning of the L2 item, although these findings did not clarify whether meanings are looked up when encountering unknown words while reading or with a view to long term retention.

Based on the above studies: the meaning is expected to be the most frequent information subjects pick up from the dictionary.

The high proficiency learners make better use of dictionaries than low proficiency ones. For example, they pay more attention not only to the meaning of a particular word but also to other information such as pronunciation, spelling usage and example of the word(s). Low proficiency learners are more inclined to look up the general meaning or a common meaning of a word only (Gu and Johnson, 1996). Neubach and Cohen (1988) studied how six EFL students (2 high-level, 2 intermediate-level, and 2 low-level) at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem used the dictionary while reading. Verbal report protocols and interview data were obtained from these students. They listed a number of interesting strategies these students used, and concluded that generally advanced students do not need the dictionary so much, while weak ones cannot use it to their advantage. Based on the above results, one of the present study hypotheses can be: The higher the level of education, the more use of the dictionary for more kinds of information.

Conclusions

The above study can be summarized as follows:

Firstly, a bilingual dictionary is the most commonly used among L2 learners.

Secondly, the proficiency or educational level of L2 learners is an important factor affecting their use of dictionaries, whether they are monolingual or bilingual (Tomaszczyk, 1979, Ahmad, 1989, and Gu, 1994).

Thirdly, findings from these studies and others such as Gu and Johnson (1996) reveal that learners of a high proficiency level are more able to identify the relevant meaning of the unknown word from context and use other information, such as pronunciation, usage, and examples of that word. On the other hand, those of a low proficiency level are more inclined only to look up the general meaning of the unknown word in the dictionary, which may or may not be appropriate for a particular context.

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