

LEARNING A LEARNER'S DICTIONARY

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ABSTRACT. EFL learners' dictionaries contain enormous quantities of valuable information. This article explores ways of reorganizing dictionary entries so that learners can study them in purposeful, systematic ways. The article concludes that the resulting materials are in line with the findings of much recent research into second language learning.

RESUMEN. Los diccionarios para estudiantes de inglés como segunda lengua contienen grandes cantidades de información de gran valor. Este artículo explora distintas formas de reorganizar las entradas de los diccionarios de manera que los aprendices puedan estudiarlas sistemáticamente. Se llega a la conclusión de que los materiales resultantes son compatibles con los hallazgos de una gran parte de las investigaciones recientes sobre el aprendizaje de segundas lenguas.

Frenchman Francois Gouin's attempt over a century ago to learn German by systematic study of a dictionary of that language has never, or at least never until recently, been taken very seriously. A modern commentator, Howatt (1984: 165), indeed, finds Gouin's account of his efforts (in chapter X of his *The Art of Teaching and Studying Languages*) highly implausible and suggests that we should not take it literally - in something of the same way perhaps (though he does not actually say this) that theologians often warn us against thinking that The Bible is historically accurate. Whatever the truth of Gouin's account, the underlying psychological appeal of his approach - which Gouin himself, never happy to use just one word if three or four could be used instead, described as 'unusual', 'extraordinary' and 'heroic' - is hard to deny and the reasons for its appeal are perhaps worth examining.

While clearly a forbidding task, 'learning the dictionary off' Gouin-style is at least quite straightforward, requiring only the dictionary itself and presumably - though Gouin is irritatingly vague about the precise mechanics of the study process - a notebook and pen (and, of course, very considerable tenacity). That is, students following this method are not dependent on a teacher, or on other students - they can 'go it alone'. This means that there will be more time when they can study. It means that students will be in greater control of their own learning process, working harder some days than others as their mood and circumstances dictate, and measuring how

much of the task has been completed and how much remains. Indeed, it might be argued that Gouin's dictionary learning approach may help students feel that the enormous task of learning a language can be broken into manageable portions. Certainly, realistic learning goals can be set for each day and, if the goals are reached, then the student will have the sensation that the task is in hand and under control. It is a task which is at the same time finite (there are after all a limited number of pages in a dictionary) and yet thorough and comprehensive (the popular assumption is that all the language is somehow 'contained' between the covers of an authoritative dictionary). It is worth pointing out too that the task is reassuringly repetitive. Students need waste no time struggling to understand the mechanics of new exercise types, but instead can concentrate all their mental energy on the new language they are trying to learn.

Regardless then of whether or not Gouin is telling the truth - and we might do well to remember the old tag: *de mortuis nil nisi bonum* - his approach seems to have a considerable amount to recommend it. Moreover, it is certainly possible to make the apparently preposterous task of learning a dictionary more manageable. The learning burden can be greatly reduced, for example, if highly infrequent, obscure, obsolete, technical, specialised and dialect words are excluded. Moreover, words which may help to facilitate subsequent learning can be studied first (Higa 1963, and Higa 1965). While Gouin, in a hurry to attend philosophy lectures at Berlin University, set himself the daunting task of learning no fewer than one thousand words a day, studying from 6 a.m. to noon each day (and suffering temporary blindness as a result), many students can afford to take a more long-term, realistic - and healthy - view of the learning process. Most important of all, since modern dictionaries are available in electronic form it is relatively easy to re-organize them: entries do not have to be studied in the same order in which they appear in the dictionary and the order of the information within entries can be changed too. Similarly, it is easy to delete certain words from the entries so that students can test themselves and determine which entries they understand and which require further attention. In this way, periods of study can be made more time-efficient.

Such considerations have in fact already born fruit, as the following extract from the recently published *Vocabulary Builders* series shows:

When you _____ money, you pay money for things that you want.
Businessmen _____ enormous sums advertising their products
 (Lawley 1996: 76)

Here the definiendum has been removed from the definition and from one of the example sentences found in the *Collins Cobuild English Dictionary* (HarperCollins 1995). Students are asked then, in effect, which word expresses this meaning and fits in this context (the answer, *spend*, is supplied elsewhere in the book).

There are of course many other ways in which the valuable information found in a dictionary could be disinterred and made available for autonomous, interactive study. Consider for example the following unpublished material and accompanying comments intended for study in CD-ROM format.

COULD

1. Read the example sentence and then try to complete the definition.

I could see that something was wrong

You use **could** to indicate that someone had the _____ to do something. You use **could not** or **couldn't** to indicate that someone was unable to do something.

(Comments.

Students key in the word they think is missing. If they get it wrong, the computer gives them another try and so on until either they get it right or give in and ask for the answer. If the student gets the right answer without being told, the computer remembers and the next time the student visits this item, (s)he is asked to supply two or three missing words:

'You use **could** to indicate that someone _____ the ability to do something. You use **could not** or **couldn't** to indicate that someone _____ to do something.'

Again students have as many 'stabs' as they like at producing the correct answer. Once students have done this exercise the complete correct definition remains on the screen.)

2. In how many of the following examples is *could* used with the meaning defined in exercise 1:
 - (a) 'More cake?' - 'Oh no, I couldn't.'
 - (b) An improvement in living standards could be years away.
 - (c) When I left school at 16, I couldn't read or write.
 - (d) Could I stop you there?

(Comments.

A good student clicks on (c) and a smiling face appears. Clicking on the others results in the appearance of both a frowning face and of the definition of *could* in that sense minus one of its words. For example, in the case of (a): 'You say '**I couldn't**' as an informal way of _____ an offer of more food or drink'. Students then try to supply the missing word in the same way as in exercise 1. The good student does this part of the exercise too, of course.

If the student gets the first part of this exercise right (that is, he or she correctly identifies which of the sentences illustrates the sense defined in exercise 1 and doesn't mis-identify any of them, then next time the computer offers 4 new sentences illustrating the same senses of 'could'. On this second occasion 2 or 3 words are omitted from the accompanying definitions).

3. How do you think sentence (a) in exercise 2 will be pronounced? Practise saying it, and then listen and repeat. What nationality do you think the speakers are ?

Continue in the same way with sentences (b), (c) and (d).

(Comments.

The sentences are read out by native English-speaking actors and actresses of varying nationalities in attractive, expressive voices. Perhaps a dozen different voices would be required to make the CD-Rom).

Rationale: This CD-Rom uses the CCED definitions of the 700 most frequent words in the English language and their accompanying examples. Being good at English means being good at using these words. The material focuses on the meaning, spelling, and typical syntactic and collocational environment of these words as well as on their functional and pragmatic uses. The consistent use of the same exercise types and sequence allows students to focus all their mental energy on the new language. The material is self-standing and open-ended, allowing ambitious students to learn and learn and learn.

While it is true that this application entails use of a PC, whereas the books in the *Vocabulary Builders* series can be studied anywhere, the CD-Rom has a number of compensatory advantages:

- It allows students to practise and check their pronunciation
- It is much more interactive, giving students as many opportunities as they wish to produce the right answer
- Above all, it allows for much more thorough recycling and revision of this critically important vocabulary - so that students can be sure they know what they need to know.

Similarly much can be done to make possible the purposeful, systematic study of a dictionary's carefully chosen example sentences as the following, also unpublished, material suggests:

“Read the 8 sentences in the left-hand column carefully and try to think of a word that could replace the underlined word without changing the meaning of the sentence. For example, in the sentence “I nearly dropped the cup”, the underlined word “nearly” could be replaced by “almost” and the sentence would still mean the same.

After you have studied the 8 sentences in this way, you can check your answers by uncovering the right-hand column. There you will find 8 more sentences each with a word underlined. For example, if the sentence “He almost fell down the stairs” is opposite the sentence “I nearly dropped the cup”, this means that the word that can replace “nearly” in “I nearly dropped the cup” is almost. (It also means that in the sentence “He almost fell down the stairs”, “nearly” could replace “almost”).

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Stage 2: After you have checked your answers in this way, wait 2 or 3 days and then repeat the process but this time covering the left-hand column and looking instead at the right-hand column.

VERY COMMON WORDS	Dates Studied:	Problems:
Check the baby's <u>okay</u>		"Can you walk <u>alright</u> ?" The nurse asked him
If you are cold, <u>close</u> the window		Just make sure you <u>shut</u> the door
Let your child make some of the small decisions concerning his daily routine. For <u>instance</u> , allow him to choose what clothes he wears at weekends.		Take, for <u>example</u> , the simple sentence: "The man climbed up the hill"
It wasn't a balloon - I'm <u>certain</u> of that		He'd never been in a class before and he was not even <u>sure</u> that he should have been teaching
I don't know <u>whether</u> they've found anybody yet		He asked <u>if</u> I had left with you and I said "no"
The house isn't big, what with three children running <u>about</u>		My mornings are spent rushing <u>around</u> after him
Francis thought it <u>likely</u> John still loved her		An airline official said a bomb was the incident's most <u>probable</u> cause
Our mothers sat us down to read and paint, <u>when</u> all we really wanted to do was to make a mess		They gave John the money <u>although</u> really he hadn't done anything

The materials illustrated above, it can plausibly be argued, fit in well with much current thinking on second language teaching and learning. A recent state-of-the-art review of the profession 'Challenge and Change in Language Teaching' (Willis and Willis 1996) looks at current research into language learning and language description and establishes the theoretical basis for a paradigm shift in English language teaching. In his foreword, Dave Willis points out that all of the contributors to the collection of papers have some doubts about the prevailing PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production) approach to English language teaching. Skehan, in the third paper in the collection, goes so far as to say:

The underlying theory for a PPP approach has now been discredited. The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automatization (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology (Skehan 1996: 18)

Willis himself reiterates that 'the research into second language learning suggests that the PPP approach is invalid (Willis and Willis 1996: v-vi)'. While in the same collection of papers, Lewis argues that although 'well-established grammar structures

clearly provide some economising frameworks', this is only a very small part of the learning task:

The element of the language which may be susceptible to PPP teaching is no more than a tiny and peripheral part of the language needed for communicative language use (Lewis 1996: 11).

Natural language use, he points out, depends on the use of a huge stock of lexical items which suggests 'a vastly greater role for memory in language learning' (ibid: 11).

Accepting the fact that the language contains many thousands of separate lexical items has embarrassing implications for methodology. If learners need thousands of discrete items, each of which needs to be 'taught', classroom language learning appears impossible. 20,000 items taking two-minutes each to 'teach' would take up a typical student's entire learning programme over eight years of English in school (ibid:11)

Lewis goes on to argue the case for giving students exposure on a massive scale to naturally occurring language while continuing to emphasize that it is difficult to see how such material can fit into educational schedules, and where it 'can, or should, be put in any modern syllabus' (ibid: 11). The three kinds of pedagogic materials which have been outlined in this paper, all based on dictionary entries, are intended to provide at least a partial answer to the problem posed by Lewis. It is perhaps worth outlining the key features, common to all three proposals, which help substantiate this claim. The materials aim to be :

1. Self-standing and self-sufficient. That is they do not depend on access to other materials and facilities. Ideally, it should be possible to study them profitably anywhere at any time. In this way, students will be able to learn more simply because there will be more times when they can learn.
2. Open-ended and ongoing, so that ambitious students can continue to learn and learn for as long as they wish.
3. Time-efficient, allowing students to determine which items they understand and can produce and which require further practice. Intermediate and advanced students, by definition, already know a lot of English but often do not know what they know and, therefore, what they do not know and still need to learn. Good materials will contain effective self-evaluation mechanisms enabling students to make more profitable use of their time. It helps too if materials can be usefully studied in periods as short as five minutes - 'a little but often' remains good advice for the language learner.

Moreover, they focus on:

4. Authentic language taken from large corpora of naturally occurring text. That is, language used by proficient, often native, speakers in the course of going about their daily business in English. In this way students will gain exposure to the language used for genuine and often highly-specific communicative

purposes in the real world rather than to the artificial and misleading language found in many classrooms and text-books. Almost inevitably such exposure ensures that students become familiar with the most frequent and most important words in their central patterns of usage.

5. Exercises which take students from meaning to word. In this way, the materials provide a genuine dress-rehearsal for production in the real time of spontaneous communication.

Such materials, it is submitted, suggest that Gouin's concept of 'learning off' a dictionary may not be so outlandish after all.

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