

## **The Effect of Dictionary Training in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language**

Margarita Cote González  
Cardenal Cisneros Comprehensive School  
marga.cotegonzalez@ono.com

Cristina Tejedor Martínez  
University of Alcalá  
cristina.tejedormartinez@uah.es

### **ABSTRACT**

The process of teaching any subject involves the use of all resources available to achieve efficient/effective result. When dealing with teaching foreign languages, we have noticed that such a traditional and apparently well-known tool as a dictionary is not so well-known nor used efficiently by students. Nevertheless, in our opinion, the dictionary should play an important role in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, we have carried out a research in our classroom in order to check that if students work systematically with the dictionary, they will improve not only their dictionary skills, but also their L2 skills mainly in writing, reading comprehension and vocabulary. The research was done at two different levels during a whole academic year focusing on dictionary training and dictionary activities.

Our work showed quite interesting outcomes: (a) students were aware of the usefulness of dictionaries because they learnt that dictionaries helped them; (b) students' confidence to face activities increased; (c) students improved their language use and knowledge; and (d) they really enjoyed the tasks. As a general conclusion we can state that with better dictionary use students acquire autonomous learning strategies for learning a foreign language.

## 1. Introduction

A dictionary is a very useful resource for EFL students when learning a language. Alongside a course book and a grammar text, a dictionary constitutes an important tool in a language-learning environment, and like the course book and the grammar, the learners' dictionary too should have a didactic focus. The role of dictionaries as sources of words, and of information about words is unequalled. In fact, dictionaries can be used productively, both for generating text and as resources for vocabulary acquisition; and receptively, for understanding (new) words or information about them. According to Summers (1988: 111), "dictionary use is a valid activity for foreign learners of English, both as an aid to comprehension and production". But their usefulness depends on learners being able to access the information they contain both speedily and accurately. Using a dictionary involves a number of skills that you might not think about when you just want to look up a word.

As teachers, there is a constant need to evaluate and consequently act on various aspects of our teaching practice because we may feel there is a need to improve. In this respect, this investigation is an action-research project on dictionary use in the classroom. Our aim is to explore ways of motivating, encouraging reflection and involving students in their learning process. At the same time we feel we can contribute to the development of learners' autonomy. The process of teaching any subject involves the use of all resources available to achieve effective results. When dealing with teaching foreign languages, we have noticed that such a traditional and apparently well-known tool as the dictionary is not very well-known or used efficiently by students, mainly because of poor knowledge about its contents and about the potential benefits of using a dictionary.

## 2. Studies of dictionary use

Several researchers agree that the pioneer of empirical user research was the American lexicographer Barnhart (1962). He carried out a questionnaire survey among teachers who reproduced their students' ranking of six information categories offered by their dictionaries and which were ordered as follows: meaning, spelling, pronunciation, synonyms, usage notes, and etymology. Although this survey was criticised, its value falls on being a starting point on the focus of user research. This study and Quirk's (1974) investigation concentrated on dictionary use by native speakers of English, though later research on EFL dictionary users replicated some of the questions used.

In the late 70s, the organization of a conference at Exeter on *Dictionaries and their Users* by professor Hartmann (1979) was the beginning of a period of intense interest in user-centred dictionary studies, mainly users and uses of learners' dictionaries. The status of the user was already acknowledged. Consequently, a number of publications have reported on subsequent studies. Hartmann (1987) compiled a critical survey of studies distinguishing four points of focus:

- (a) Identifying the specific categories of linguistic information (e.g. meaning, spelling, pronunciation, grammar) perceived as important by particular groups of dictionary users.
- (b) Seeking to throw light on the users themselves, and on their assumptions and expectations in turning to the dictionary.
- (c) Investigating the study or occupational activities (e.g. writing in the L2, translating into the L1) in the course of which and in support of which a dictionary is used.
- (d) Investigating the reference skills which users have developed, or need to develop, to use their dictionaries more effectively, and evaluating teaching programmes or aids designed to enhance such skills. (Hartmann 1987: 12)

Other authors have summarized a number of reports on dictionary use investigations and commented on them. Wiegand (1998) listed eighty six user studies. Hulstijn and Atkins (1998) reported over seventy studies from a pedagogical perspective. Tono (1998) categorised nearly one hundred and seventy papers and in a later work (2001) summarized more than forty studies. Dolezal and McCreary (1999) extended their annotated bibliography to more than five hundred publications on the topic. Cowie (1999: 178) used the organization proposed by Hartmann (1987), adding two more points of focus, to provide “an even-handed critical perspective on the field”, evaluating the findings of the studies. Nesi (2000) commented on more than twenty studies criticising several aspects of some investigations. Hartman (2001) briefly reports on publications organized around six perspectives on dictionary use: pedagogical lexicography, dictionary awareness, user sociology, reference needs, reference skills, and user training. Bogaards (2003) summarized surveys and experimental research on uses and users of dictionaries. Welker (2010) provided a useful summary of empirical studies on dictionary use, including those related to the teaching of dictionary use. Finally, Lew (2011) explains recent development in the dictionary use studies. We can conclude that the majority of the empirical user studies available today have been done in the last three decades or so.

Although much research has been done over the last three decades on this topic, Bogaards (2003: 33) points out that “uses and users of dictionaries remain for the moment relatively unknown”, especially in Spain, as relatively few studies on dictionary use while teaching English as a foreign language have been carried out at levels of Compulsory Secondary Education. Some studies can be mentioned, for example, Crespo (2001), Bruton and Broca (2004), and Bruton (2007), though almost all of them were activities or questionnaires carried out in a particular occasion, not included in a training programme. Nevertheless, we consider that future user research should learn from all previous works and take into account Tarp’s (2009: 19) recommendations: “It must formulate clear objectives; (...) and carried out meticulous planning. In this respect, the advantage of combining various methods within the framework of one and the same research project should be considered”. Therefore, we have devised a study on dictionary use research among Spanish students at Secondary

Education that includes not only a questionnaire but also a training programme to improve students' dictionary skills.

### **3. An empirical research on dictionary use**

The research was carried out at two levels of Compulsory Secondary Education during a whole academic year. Two clearly distinctive but interrelated parts were dealt with: the first part regarding reference needs and skills. The second part was a training programme intended to improve the first. The work begins by analysing the introductory pages of dictionaries, the key starting point.

Our objective, therefore, was to see to what extent systematic dictionary training could improve not only students' knowledge about their dictionaries, but also their linguistic competence in second language skills and could contribute to autonomous learning. In fact, we agree with Cowie (1983) that there are many aspects of vocabulary learning that can be taught and/or studied through a dictionary. It can be a learning strategy for the study of lexis. He points out that "[a] dictionary, used properly, can tell you much more than how to spell words. It can extend and improve your knowledge of English far beyond the range of any textbook" (Cowie 1983: 135). This idea of the dictionary as a learning tool is what we wanted to introduce to our students so they would benefit from the amount of information at their disposal. We also wanted to change their idea that a dictionary was merely a book to consult on specific occasions.

Our intention was and remains, as Beattie explained (1973: 161), to "help the students help themselves, to help them to learn for themselves from dictionaries". Better dictionary use during compulsory studies suggests that students can acquire autonomous learning strategies to learn a foreign language and will become better dictionary users in their future studies.

#### **3.1. Setting**

The study was done at a state secondary school in Spain,<sup>1</sup> near Madrid, where one of the authors worked as an EFL teacher. The school received students from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds. There were some bilingual students, but most of them had very little contact with the English language outside the classroom.

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study was carried out in the second cycle of Compulsory Secondary Education, this was seen as a good time to train students in these skills so that they could be more efficient users and take better advantage of a resource that everybody owns. Thus, the levels chosen were third and fourth year. That means that the average age was 14–15 and 15–16 respectively. The class sizes were average in size: 29 students in the third year and 22 students in the fourth. Motivation also varied greatly between one level and

the other. The younger ones were quite good students, highly motivated and hard-working, whereas the other group were made up by students with a very low motivation due to repeated failure in their academic life and, consequently, poor prospects of passing the GCSE.

### 3.3. Methodology

Two clearly distinctive but interrelated parts were dealt with during the research. The first part was to identify reference needs and skills. The second part was a training programme intended to improve the first. The procedures for data collection involved conducted firstly a questionnaire of reference needs, and secondly, several tests of reference skills over the whole year as a part of the normal English course during normal class hours. In the tests, students had to complete certain linguistic tasks making use of the dictionary. All the instructions were given in the students' mother tongue. The programming was organized to work with students every three weeks. Taking into account the time and the syllabus content to cover, we started in November and finished in June.

Before beginning with the training program, time was needed to get to know the groups of students: that is why we started a month and a half after the beginning of the classes. It was also necessary to explain to students the aim of the project and seek their cooperation. This was carried out through a class discussion about the usefulness of the dictionary and ways in which it could help them. In the fourth year, where motivation was very low, we needed to reinforce the discussion with practical examples taken from the students' own work and have class discussion about them in order to make the students aware of their linguistic problems and the need to improve. Their systematic work would also be assessed in the final evaluation.

Below is the schedule of the training for each of the steps and the activities. As the school year is divided in three terms, we tried to spread the activities out evenly as explained below.

- 1ST TERM: In this first term, the activities aimed at an initial contact with the resource students are going to work with:

1st step: 2nd and 3rd week of November

1. A questionnaire of reference needs was administered. We sought to get information about the dictionaries that students possess, what they use them for and how.

2. An initial worksheet with five exercises was prepared and given to the students to be completed with the help of the dictionary and no explanations in order to check the students' ability. The exercises were varied: students had to work on meanings (translation L1-L2 and vice versa), grammatical information, collocations and idioms.

2nd step: 3rd week of December

3. The actual training stage began with the presentation of the introductory page of the dictionary we were going to use. By means of an OHP the teacher presented the Guide '*How to use the Oxford Study*' and explained what is in a dictionary, how the information is presented and how to find the different types of information.

4. Students practised by means of a quiz. This served as a pre-test.

- 2ND TERM: Once students have acquired certain knowledge of the information contained in a dictionary and had browsed through it with the purpose of doing the quiz, the training stage began. Now students could rely on the information found in the dictionary and the help of the teacher.

1st step: 4th week of January

5. The first worksheet contained exercises that focused mainly on parts of speech.

2nd step: 2nd week of February

6. The second worksheet dealt mainly with choosing the right meaning in context. It was completed with more work on grammar (the plural of nouns and verb tenses).

- 3RD TERM: In this term the activities are distributed in three sessions, the methodology being the same as for the previous term.

1st step: 1st and 3rd week of April

7. The Guide '*How to use the Oxford Study*' was revisited. The progression of the activities called for some revision.

8. Worksheet with activities on grammatical/syntactic information, phrasal verbs and idioms was completed.

2nd step: 3rd week of May.

9. Students were given two texts to translate, the first into English and the second into Spanish, including all possible types of information. The lexical items we wanted our students to focus on were underlined and tagged to guide them in the search.

3rd step: 2nd week of June

10. Students were given the initial worksheet to complete again under the same circumstances, with the help of dictionaries and no explanation from the teacher. The aim of this post-test was to check whether there had been any progress.

11. Finally, students' opinions and their assessment of the work are shown in an end-of-year questionnaire.

### 3.4. Materials

The dictionary that students worked with was the *Oxford Study Español-Inglés/Inglés-Español*. The criteria for selecting this dictionary were based on the level of students, the type of information included, and the range of difficulty (challenging enough for the quicker students but accessible for the weaker ones).

The exercises included in the worksheets were taken from two sources: some were adapted from different material published on dictionary use; and others have been prepared from a collection of students' error production built up over the years of teaching, a sort of corpus of the major problem areas met in classroom activities. Appropriate exercises were prepared.

### 3.5. Procedure for data analysis and discussions of findings

While in this paper the focus is on the results of both questionnaires, the initial and final worksheets,<sup>2</sup> it should be noted that a systematic training program was carried out throughout the whole academic year. This included explanations and exercises of various kinds. The conclusions in the final section of this paper reflect the outcomes of the overall students' work.

#### 3.5.1. Introductory questionnaire

The first questionnaire<sup>3</sup> was divided into two parts: the first was for information about the students' English studies; the second part consisted of ten questions asking students reflect on three key aspects of dictionary use:

1. The types of dictionaries they had at home and what for they used them.
2. Their opinion about the dictionaries they owned.
3. Their opinions about their knowledge and ability to use dictionaries.

Based on the data obtained from the students' answer to each of the questions, the following observations can be made.

1. The first part, about the students' English studies, shows that well over half of the students questioned had not extended their English studies further than compulsory education. Nevertheless, there seems to be a tendency for younger students start studying English earlier.

2. In the second part, Questions 1, 2 and 3 deal with information about the dictionaries that they own and use. Since they almost exclusively use the dictionary for word translation, a bilingual dictionary is preferred for school use.

Most students reported using the Oxford (Pocket) and the Collins (Pocket Plus) as a result of recommendations teachers have made.

3. In Question 4 students were asked to indicate the occasions on which they use the dictionary and rate the frequency with which they look up certain types of information. Students' responses indicate that they make wider use of the dictionary when they study than when they read. When they study a higher percentage look up every word they do not know and when they read, they just look up certain unknown words. The information consulted more frequently by students are primarily translations, then spelling and very rarely they look up any other type of information like idioms, phrasal verbs, grammar or pronunciation.

4. Questions 5 and 6 seek to know their degree of satisfaction with the works of reference they have. Most of the students think that their dictionaries provide all the information that they need. Only one student complained that some terms that are currently used are not included, and another student remarked that sometimes he could not find what he is looking for. This remark would be related to lack of ability rather than dictionary inadequacy.

5. In Questions 7 and 8, we wanted to check students' ability to recognize some basic symbols and abbreviations commonly used in dictionaries. Students admitted that they only partially knew the symbols and abbreviations presented in the questionnaire. The more familiar abbreviations are *sing* = singular; *n* = noun and *PHRV* = phrasal verb.

6. Finally, the last two questions reported their impressions about their ability when using the dictionary and finding the information they look up. Overall, students considered that their ability to use the dictionary was Good. About half of the students said that they found the required information easily and quickly. However, for the younger group the percentage was somewhat higher (89.5%): they rated their ability as Good or Very Good. Whereas, for the students in fourth year a lower percentage (66.3%) reported their ability as Good or Very Good. In this group, a number of students (27.1%) rated their skills as Average or Poor.

### 3.5.2. Initial worksheet

The next stage consisted in preparing a set of exercises to check the actual students' skills when solving certain linguistic tasks using the dictionary. Béjoint (1989: 210) draws up a checklist of skills that the ideal dictionary user should possess, and states that previously "instructors should be able to select what is relevant to their groups, after having analyzed their needs and skills". We have already described our group of users and accordingly have decided on the strategies that we want to work with our students from the list:

1. Firstly, finding a lexical item in the dictionary  
Finding a lexical item in an entry with a different headword

Finding a multi-word lexical item  
Choosing among different senses in a polysemous entry  
Understanding symbols and abbreviations.

2. Secondly, finding a piece of information in the microstructure.  
Finding information about the spelling of words: inflected forms (plurals, comparatives, irregular verbs)  
Finding information about usage, understanding usage labels  
Finding information about the grammar of words  
Using the equivalents proposed

A worksheet<sup>4</sup> with five different exercises was drawn up. Each one of these exercises was intended to deal with one of the most relevant categories of linguistic information that can be found in a dictionary. These five exercises were prepared to be completed during two sessions of 50 minutes, but it took longer than we had planned.

Our intention was that students would complete the activities by themselves, with the help of the dictionary and no explanations from the teacher. It must be reminded that we wanted to check their usage ability. But we noticed that it was the first time for some students to use a dictionary and that there were others who, having used them, did not know how to cope with the tasks proposed. It was then absolutely necessary to provide some help and instructions to get them started.

The discussion of the results that follows not only arises from the analysis of the statistical data but also from classroom observation and the notes taken by the teacher during the completion of the activity. Besides, we have to point out that for the correction and analysis of the answers to each one of the exercises, we counted the number of correct and incorrect answers and also the ones that were left blank.

In exercises 1 and 3 students were asked to translate some sentences containing several underlined words. These are polysemous words, that is, they have more than one meaning, so students had to take account of the context to make the right choice. In the first exercise, students had to use the Spanish-English part of the dictionary, since the words given were in their mother tongue; and in the third exercise, they had to use the English-Spanish part, since the words given were in the foreign language they are learning.

Apparently, this exercise did not entail much difficulty. Nevertheless, there were clear instances that suggested that students do not know how to manage the information found because they ignore the conventions of the works of reference, that is, how the information is presented and how to use it:

- Students tried to look up the inflected forms of the verbs instead of the infinitive: *hizo*
- Students looked up the pronouns that accompany some pronominal verbs separately: *se hizo*

- Sometimes the equivalents were taken from examples: *partirse* = ‘trying’, from **partirse** *v pron* to split: *Estaba intentando arreglarlo y se partió la madera*. I was trying to mend it and the wood split.
- In exercise 3, we found some equivalents taken from the contextual references or explanations in brackets or cross-references: ‘classical plays’ is translated as *lugar* = place, taken from **play 11** *vt (lugar)* actuar en: *They are going to play Wembley Stadium*. Van a actuar en el estadio de Wembley; ‘run’ is translated as *vio* = see, taken from the entry **run 1** (...) *Ver tb* hit-and-run.
- On some other occasions, students thought they knew the word and either did not bother to look it up or choose the first equivalent; this is the case with f) *Estoy perdiendo el tiempo contigo* = ‘I’m losing the time with you’

In the third exercise, apart from the equivalent, students had to indicate the part of speech to which each underlined word belonged to. To save time and gain efficiency, students should first work out the part of speech and then provide the equivalent required. We observed that students acted the other way round, which does not save any time but increases the probability of error. In a large number of occasions, they forgot to mark the part of speech. We also noticed that some students completed the task without consulting the dictionary. These students got wrong translations such as *conseguir* = ‘to get’ for ‘mean to’, *ramos* = ‘bunch’ for ‘kinds of flowers’, or *conciertos* = ‘concerts’ for ‘classical plays’.

In exercise 2 students had to translate some sentences paying attention to the grammatical information contained in the entry under each of the underlined words.

Students has mainly used the dictionary before to find meanings, but they could not work out that it would help them to write syntactically correct sentences, that is, that a dictionary may provide them with grammatical information. This activity required more help from the teacher than any other. It was necessary to insist on this new use of their works of reference during all the session, illustrating with some examples. In spite of this effort, many students completed the tasks with the words they knew, especially in sentences where there were no unknown lexical items, such as a) *A mí no me gusta ir de vacaciones* o j) *Me están haciendo una casa*. The students kept on looking up the words they did not know to find the translation equivalent. They may find the words needed but they did not pay attention to the grammatical information, how words relate to one another to form syntactically correct sentences. They looked up all the words they did not know separately and combined them in different ways, yielding a bewildering variety of possibilities. Due to the special characteristic of this exercise, not only the correct and incorrect answers were registered but also all the examples given by the students for in-depth analysis.

Exercise 4 dealt with the finding of collocations, how words combine together to make language sound more natural. Students were given a gap filling exercise with a missing verb. They had to look up the noun and find the verb that occurs in the collocation. Previously the concept of collocation had to be explained. The students experimented difficulties trying to find the noun in the sentences in order to select the

appropriate verb for the combination. As in exercise number 2, some examples had to be given to show how to proceed. These indications facilitated the correct completion of the exercise. Nonetheless, the analysis of the answers showed that:

- Students failed to develop searching strategies that could lead them to the correct responses. For example, the answer to the sentence u) ‘The club is \_\_\_\_\_ a party tomorrow’ can be found in the Spanish part of the dictionary, but nobody tried it there and most of the students left it blank.
- A number of students did not use the dictionary and came up with a verb that might go in the blank provided and would make some sense to the sentence, for example: s) ‘How many mistakes have you got?’; z) ‘Please, will you do/have a photo of us?’
- Others selected the first equivalent that appeared in the entry consulted.

And finally, exercise 5 dealt with idioms. Students were given a matching exercise in which, first, they had to look up six idioms in the dictionary and match their meanings with six pictures; and, secondly, they had to make the necessary changes to build a grammatically correct sentence with those idioms.

The concept of idiom had to be explained, indications about how to find such elements had to be given, and last of all, students were warned about the inflectional changes that had to be made in nouns and pronouns for the sentence to make sense. After the instructions, the matching part was completed easily and quickly but they did not know what and how to replace the pronouns in the two idioms ‘to be the spitting image of someone’ and ‘to take to one’s heels’.

The dictionary contains linguistic categories that some of our students have not fully mastered such as transitive, intransitive or pronominal verbs. Here the teacher also must provide some help. It is striking the case of many students of the fourth year, whose knowledge of both languages, the target and their mother tongue, is so poor that they cannot distinguish a verb or an adjective from a noun in a sentence. Obviously that hinders learners’ progress.

### 3.5.3. Final worksheet

The final worksheet consisted of the same exercises as the initial one. Our aim was to evaluate the students’ progress since the beginning of the training programme in November to the end in June and check to what extent the students had acquired the dictionary skills that had been working during the course and whether they were able to apply them in order to improve their performance.

To achieve this purpose, the correction of activities and data analysis were carried out through a detailed record of each of the students’ performance in every item of all the exercises. This allowed us to compare the results of the initial and final worksheets and to monitor the progress of every student. These results were biased by certain

variables that affected the context in which the work was carried out if we compare it with the initial work. We would like to point out that:

- The set programme and sequencing had to be modified due to some end-of-year incidentals. The activity completion took two days instead of the three that had previously been planned.
- Irregularity in classroom attendance, especially among students in the fourth year, was also a factor to take into account. Many students had already given up the course because they had no longer expectations of success.
- For some of the students still attending classes, and for the same reason, motivation was low. The impetus gained at the beginning of the year is now lost, as well as the interest and effort of these students.

In this instance, students worked on their own, using the dictionary but with no help of the teacher.

The analysis of the final worksheet only becomes meaningful if compared with the initial one. The comparison of the two activities yields some results that we are going to discuss below:

#### EXERCISES 1 AND 3

- In quantitative terms, the overall percentages of correct answers increased significantly, getting better results.
- Students became fully aware that the information found in the dictionary can be of help when doing their tasks correctly. As a consequence, fewer exercises were completed at random or making use of their previous knowledge: a positive result was that we had not recorded such a wide variety of incorrect answers as we did in the initial worksheet.
- Students gained more self-confidence. As a result, students made considerable effort to answer all the questions and could cope better with long and intricate entries (e.g. the entry *hacer*).
- In exercise 3, though there had been advances in the identification of the parts of speech, it still remained one of the elements of information more difficult to deal with. On the whole, the students did not seem to have grasped the importance of recognizing the part of speech as a quick and safe way to the right choice. We detected that students first translate and then note down the word class.

#### EXERCISE 2

- The percentage of correct answers is slightly higher than the figures obtained in the initial worksheet. We would like to point out the slight rise in the most difficult structures (items h and j) that no student was able to complete in the initial worksheet and the 100% obtained in items g) and l), the most well-known structures by students.

- Qualitatively, we should emphasize that students have been much more careful to translate the sentences, producing, though not entirely correct, more coherent responses.

#### EXERCISES 4 AND 5

- These last two exercises were significantly affected by the circumstances mentioned above that interfered with the process. Some students were short of time, so the percentage of non-answered questions is high.
- Half the students of the fourth year did not complete the questions because either they dropped the subject or did not bother to do it. However, there was a small group of students who made a remarkable effort to complete the tasks assigned and would have achieved their objectives if there had not been for their low level of language knowledge.
- A qualitative progress in our students' linguistic productions can be reported. They adapted the information found to the context, making the necessary changes that make sense to the sentences. In exercise 5 we have observed that students had learnt how to make the required changes in the idioms.

In summary, we have also perceived clear differences in the results of both courses. In the fourth year, there are signs of little progress with regard to the outcome in the initial worksheet. A high percentage of items not answered, irregularities and inconsistencies that affect the data analysis and assessment were recorded. Quite different from the progress of students in the third year, whose improvement regarding dictionary skills and language proficiency was clearer.

We can conclude by asserting that the assessment of the outcome of the training programme was positive. Nevertheless, we also found some aspects that need further dictionary skills training.

a. In the first place, those aspects related to the identification and use of the word class and those related to the grammar of words, how words combine according to certain rules to make syntactically correct sentences should be practised. More awareness-raising activities are needed for the students to understand and master how to use the dictionary for productions tasks.

b. In the second place, the low level of language knowledge that some of the students exhibited when dealing with basic linguistic concepts such as word classes (noun, verb, adjective, adverb), kinds of verbs (transitive, intransitive, pronominal), etc., and the lack of vocabulary knowledge in the target language impeded their progress, since it is very difficult for these students to make the right choice of words if they do not understand the sentence.

#### 3.5.4. End-of-year questionnaire

At the end of the activities, we collected the students' opinions about the project through an end-of-year questionnaire. This consisted of seven questions. Numbers 6 and 7 are open-ended, numbers 2, 3 and 4 are multiple choice and numbers 1 and 5 combine both techniques.

1. With question no.1, we wanted to find out whether the students felt they had learnt something new after the training. All our students agreed that they had learnt something new, in particular, they reported becoming aware that a dictionary contains much more information than they had thought.

2. In questions no. 2 and 3, they had to express their preferences for and difficulties with various types of training activities. There were differences in the responses between the two groups. As the responses of the students in the fourth year were very irregular, it was difficult to draw any reasonable conclusion. For the other group, their favourite activities were translations and those about idioms, phrasal verbs and collocations. Students reported that the activities about meaning in context and grammatical information were the most difficult ones.

3. In question no. 4, they had to indicate what skills they have improved on the most. A large majority agreed that their speed when looking for some information has greatly improved. Quite a number of students also noted that their knowledge of the symbols and abbreviations had improved.

4. In question no. 5, they had to rate their current ability in relation with the beginning of the course. Three students did not answer that question. Two more students said that their ability had not improved. In one case this because of the student's low level of English; and in the other case the student's skills were already Very Good before the training. The rest of the students felt that their skills had improved.

5. In question no. 6, they were asked how they could benefit from the techniques they had learned. The common theme of their responses was that they had learnt to use a dictionary more efficiently (quicker and easier). Dictionary skills can help them to do exercises and translations, that is, to learn English.

6. Only students from the third year added other comments to question no.7. Mainly, they stated that the experience had been interesting and amusing and that they had learned more about the English language at the same time.

To sum up, the underlying idea to all the responses was that students felt that their dictionary skills had improved because they were quicker and could find the information more easily and efficiently.

#### **4. Conclusions**

One of the hypotheses that has been tested through this project is that dictionaries are a stock of meanings to students and that they make very poor use of it (because they do not know how to). Besides, they do not read the introductory pages containing explanations of what the dictionary contains and instructions on how to use it. The first step should be to help the learners discover all the hidden possibilities by:

- a. teaching them what a learner's dictionary is
- b. teaching them how the information is organized
- c. devising a programme of activities to learn to use it

The activities proposed for dictionary use stimulate the learners' creativity, because students are not only working on an exercise but they are exploring the language. It is very also important because they can boost the self-esteem of weaker learners.

The role of the teacher is to train students to access all the information efficiently. During this process the teachers' role is twofold:

- a) in the first stage, their task is to provide preliminary explanations and descriptions that would introduce their learners to the topic; and
- b) in the second stage, the teacher acts as a guide and an observer, controlling the work of students, taking notes, confirming hypothesis and suggesting possible different courses of action.

As we have seen, there are many different aspects of dictionary training. There is no point trying to teach them all at once. Dictionary training should become a regular feature of classroom procedures so that students get into good habits and adequately develop their skills. It is advisable that students practice these skills at regular intervals throughout their academic life so that the skills acquired can be transferred outside the classroom in an autonomous way. In fact, many scholars, for example Stark (1990: 28) and Prado Aragonés (2001: 209), share the idea that dictionary use should be integrated into the teaching situation. We believe that this teaching strategy should be included in the language curriculum, and the best way would be to include it as an integral part of textbook units (for example, to teach the verb complementation, phrasal verbs, word formation, collocations).

Students' assessment through the end-of-year questionnaire showed positive outcomes of this training. Among their opinions as to how the training had contributed to their learning, students said that they have learnt how to use the dictionary correctly. They have discovered the multiple meanings of words. They are quicker and more efficient when selecting items. They think that the techniques they have learnt may help them to write compositions, make translations and do other exercises. Finally, they have learnt new words and expressions. They have learnt not only about the dictionary but also about the language in an enjoyable way. Their opinions confirm our first

hypothesis that students ignore all the possibilities of the learners' dictionaries and state the fact that their actual ability markedly contrasts with the ability they thought they had at the beginning of the training programme. Besides, on the personal side, we think that the work carried out has contributed greatly to students' awareness raising, self-confidence and reassurance.

Finally, we believe that the whole development of the study has confirmed the research hypothesis. We can conclude that the systematic training has raised our students' awareness of the usefulness of the dictionary. We also think that it has contributed to change students' point of view about their ability and about dictionaries. From their responses on the final questionnaire, we can deduce that they are starting to view the dictionary as a learning aid. We are convinced that better dictionary use during compulsory studies may result in students acquiring autonomous learning strategies for learning a foreign language and will mean better dictionary users at further stages in their education.

### Notes

1. IES Campiña Alta (El Casar, Guadalajara).
2. See Appendix.
3. In order to gain a better insight of the analysis of the data gathered from the students' answers to the questionnaire, we present the model used in the appendix which will help contextualize the information obtained and the ideas and comments.
4. Check *Dictionary Skills* worksheet in the appendix.

### References

- Barnhart, Clarence (1962): "Problems in Editing Commercial Monolingual Dictionaries". In F. W. Householder and S. Saporta, eds., *Problems in Lexicography*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 161–181.
- Beattie, Nicholas (1973): "Teaching Dictionary Use". *Modern Languages* 54: 161–168.
- Béjoint, Henry (1989): "The Teaching of Dictionary Use: Present State and Future Tasks". In F. J. Hausmann et al., eds., *Wörterbücher. Dictionaries. Dictionnaires*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 208–215.
- (1994): *Modern Lexicography*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bogaards, Paul (2003): "Uses and Users of Dictionaries". In P. van Sterkenburg, ed., *A Practical Guide to Lexicography*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 26–33.
- Bruton, Anthony (2007): "Vocabulary Learning from Dictionary Referencing and Language Feedback in EFL Translational Writing". *Language Teaching Research* 11: 413–431.
- and M. Ángeles Broca Fernández (2004): "Acquiring and Using Dictionaries in State Secondary Schools". *English Teaching Professional* 31: 16–17.
- Cote González, Margarita and Cristina Tejedor Martínez (2007): "Dictionary Use and Translation Activities in the Classroom". *Horizontes de Lingüística Aplicada* 6, 2: 147–162.
- Cowie, Anthony Paul (1983): "English Dictionaries for the Foreign Learner". In R.R.K. Hartmann, ed., *Lexicography: Principles and Practice*. London: Academic Press, 135–144.

- (1999): *English Dictionaries for Foreign Learners. A History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Crespo, Juan (2001): “Los diccionarios en y para el currículo de la enseñanza secundaria”. In M. Ayala Castro, ed., *Diccionarios y enseñanza*. Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 47–107.
- Dolezal, Fredric T. and Don R. McCreary (1999): *Pedagogical Lexicography Today*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Hartmann, R.R.K., ed. (1979): *Dictionaries and their Users*. Exeter Linguistic Studies 4. Exeter: University of Exeter.
- (1987): “Four Perspectives on Dictionary Use: A Critical Review of Research Methods”. In A.P. Cowie, ed., *The Dictionary and the Language Learner*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 11–28.
- (2001): *Teaching and Researching Lexicography*. Harlow: Pearson Education.
- Hulstijn, Jan and B. T. Sue Atkins (1998): “Empirical Research on Dictionary Use in Foreign-Language Learning: Survey and Discussion”. In B. T. Sue Atkins, ed., *Using Dictionaries. Studies of Dictionary Use by Language Learners and Translators*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Lew, Robert (2011): “Studies in Dictionary Use: Recent Developments”. *International Journal of Lexicography* 24, 1: 1–4.
- Nesi, Hilary (2000): *The Use and Abuse of EFL Dictionaries*. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag.
- Prado Aragonés, Josefina (2001): “El diccionario como recurso para la enseñanza del léxico: estrategias y actividades para su aprovechamiento”. In M. Ayala Castro, ed., *Diccionarios y Enseñanza*. Alcalá de Henares: Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Alcalá, 205–226.
- Quirk, Randolph (1973): “The Social Impact of Dictionaries in the UK.”. In R.I. McDavid and A.E. Duckert, eds., *Lexicography in English*. New York: Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 76–88.
- Stark, Martin (1990): *Dictionary Workbook: A Critical Evaluation of Dictionary Workbooks for the Foreign Language Learner*. Exeter Linguistic Studies, 16. Exeter: University of Exeter Press.
- Summers, Diane (1988): “The Role of Dictionaries in Language Learning”. In Ronald Carter and M. McCarthy (eds.), *Vocabulary and Language Teaching*. London: Longman, 111–125.
- Tarp, Sven (2009): “Reflections on Lexicographical User Research”. *Lexikos* 19:1–22.
- Tono, Yukio (1998): “Interacting with the Users: Research Findings in EFL Dictionary User Studies”. In T. McArthur and I. Kernerman (eds.), *Lexicography in Asia*. Tel Aviv: Password Publishers, 97–118.
- (2001): *Research on Dictionary Use in the Context of Foreign Language Learning. Focus on Reading Comprehension*. Tübingen: Niemeyer.
- Welker, Herbert Andreas (2010): *Dictionary Use. A General Survey of Empirical Studies*. Brasília.
- Wiegand, Herbert E. (1998): *Wörterbuchforschung. Untersuchungen zur Wörterbuchbenutzung, zur Theorie, Geschichte, Kritik und Automatisierung der Lexikographie*. Berlin: W. De Gruyter.

## Appendix

## QUESTIONNAIRE

SURNAME: .....

NAME: .....

ENGLISH STUDIES:

PRIMARY SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_

SECONDARY SCHOOL \_\_\_\_\_

OFICIAL SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES \_\_\_\_\_

No. YEARS:

ANY OTHER SCHOOL OF LANGUAGES \_\_\_\_\_

No. YEARS:

CURRENT YEAR: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What kind of dictionaries do you have at home?

NONE \_\_\_\_\_

MONOLINGUAL	}	1. _____
		2. _____
		3. _____

BILINGUAL	}	1. _____
		2. _____
		3. _____

2. What dictionary do you use more often to do your tasks?

\_\_\_\_\_ Monolingual

\_\_\_\_\_ Bilingual

\_\_\_\_\_ None

3. Has your English teacher ever recommended you any dictionary? Which one?

\_\_\_\_\_

4. On what occasions do you use an English dictionary? [Please, tick the options that correspond to the use you make of your dictionary].

a. when I read	}	In every word I don't know	_____
		In some words I don't know	_____
		Rarely	_____

b. when I study	}	In every word I don't know	_____
		In some words I don't know	_____
		Rarely	_____

c. when you write, you use the dictionary to look up: [Tick the items in which you use the dictionary and cross out the numbers 1,2,3 depending on your frequency of use: **1 = often** **2 = sometimes**; **3 = rarely**].

\_\_\_\_\_ (1) (2) (3) word translation

- \_\_\_ (1) (2) (3) spelling
- \_\_\_ (1) (2) (3) expresions, idioms
- \_\_\_ (1) (2) (3) grammatical information
- \_\_\_ (1) (2) (3) phrasal verbs
- \_\_\_ (1) (2) (3) pronuniciation

5. Do you think your dictionary provides you with all the information you need?.

- 1. \_\_\_ YES
- 2. \_\_\_ NO

6. If you have answered 'no', what type of information is missing?

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_

7. Do you understand all the symbols and abbreviations used in the dictionary?

- 1. \_\_\_ YES
- 2. \_\_\_ NO
- 3. \_\_\_ PARTIALLY

8. Do you know what these symbols and abbreviations stand for?

- |     |       |      |       |
|-----|-------|------|-------|
| GB  | _____ | n    | _____ |
| vt  | _____ | PHRV | _____ |
| LOC | _____ | sing | _____ |

9. When you look up a word in the dictionary, you find what you are looking for

- 1. \_\_\_ Easily and quickly
- 2. \_\_\_ Yes, but occasionally I find it hard
- 3. \_\_\_ Rarely

10. On the whole, you consider that your ability to use a dictionary is:

- 1. \_\_\_ VERY GOOD
- 2. \_\_\_ GOOD
- 3. \_\_\_ AVERAGE
- 4. \_\_\_ BAD

NAME:

DATE:

### DICTIONARY SKILLS

• EJERCICIO 1. PALABRAS CON MÁS DE UN SIGNIFICADO.

Traduce las siguientes frases al inglés. Utiliza tu diccionario para comprobar las palabras subrayadas. ¡Presta atención a los distintos significados!

- a) Nuestra vecina se hizo actriz y enseguida hizo su primer papel en Broadway.
- b) Se hizo viejo.
- c) ¿Cuánto cuesta la entrada al parque de atracciones?
- d) Mi amigo estaba sentado en el banco del parque.
- e) La taza de cristal se partió en dos.
- f) Estoy perdiendo el tiempo contigo

• EJERCICIO 2. INFORMACIÓN GRAMATICAL.

El diccionario también contiene información gramatical que te puede ayudar a utilizar las palabras correctamente. Recuerda leer la entrada completa de forma que puedas encontrar esta clase de información. Traduce las siguientes frases al inglés. Utiliza tu diccionario para comprobar las palabras subrayadas.

- g) A mí no me gusta ir de vacaciones.
- h) No pude impedir que mi perro mordiera al hombre.
- i) El guarda nos dijo que no pisásemos la hierba.
- j) Me están haciendo una casa.
- k) Tardo mucho en hacer los deberes.
- l) Hace frío en tu casa.

• EJERCICIO 3. PALABRAS CON MÁS DE UN SIGNIFICADO Y DISTINTA CATEGORÍA GRAMATICAL.

Una palabra en inglés puede tener varias traducciones en español y pueden pertenecer a más de una categoría gramatical. Para entender esta información en el diccionario es necesario aprender a reconocer los códigos y abreviaturas utilizadas. Utiliza tu diccionario para traducir las palabras subrayadas e indicar la categoría gramatical de las mismas.

- m) I mean to write a book.
- n) He's a bore.
- o) In Almagro, we can attend classical plays every year.
- p) There are two kinds of flowers here: roses and tulips.
- q) Not many people back up the new President.
- r) Mrs Ryan runs a youth hostel.

• EJERCICIO 4. COLOCACIONES.

Para utilizar la lengua inglesa de forma correcta es necesario conocer las combinaciones en las que se usan algunas palabras. Busca los sustantivos de estas frases en el diccionario para seleccionar el verbo apropiado con el que los sustantivos se combinan.

- s) How many mistakes have you \_\_\_\_\_?
- t) \_\_\_\_\_ a shower before going to bed?
- u) The club is \_\_\_\_\_ a party tomorrow.
- v) After a lot of thought, I finally \_\_\_\_\_ a decision.
- w) When I saw her, she was about to \_\_\_\_\_ suicide.
- x) I \_\_\_\_\_ my bed every day before coming to school.
- y) Let's \_\_\_\_\_ a drink.
- z) Please, will you \_\_\_\_\_ a photo of us?

• EJERCICIO 5. IDIOMS.

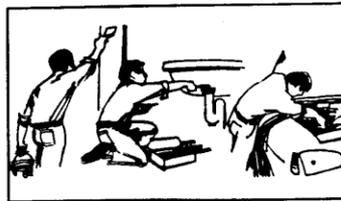
Comprueba el significado de los siguientes *idioms* en el diccionario. Escribe el *idiom* correcto bajo el dibujo apropiado. Realiza los cambios necesarios a los verbos y los pronombres para que la frase sea correcta gramaticalmente.

to take to one's heels  
to go to the dogs  
to be a jack-of-all-trades

to take a short cut  
to be the odd one out  
to be the spitting image of someone



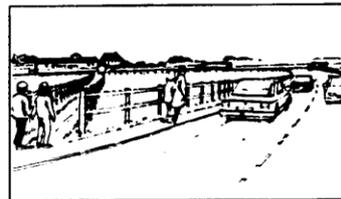
1 He's the \_\_\_\_\_ of his father.



4 He's a \_\_\_\_\_.



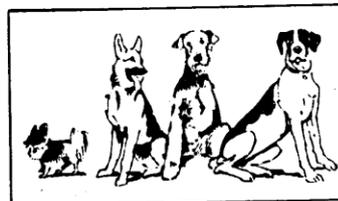
2 He's gone \_\_\_\_\_.



5 They're taking a \_\_\_\_\_ to the station.



3 He's taken \_\_\_\_\_.



6 The dog on the left is the \_\_\_\_\_.

**FINAL QUESTIONNAIRE**

1. Once you have completed all the activities, do you think you learnt something new?  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO

If you have answered YES, what have you learnt when using the dictionary in class?

2. Which of these activities did you like best?
- choosing the right meaning in context
  - choosing the right equivalent in English
  - grammar information
  - idioms, phrasal verbs, collocations.
  - translation

3. Which of these activities did you find more difficult?
- choosing the right meaning in context
  - choosing the right equivalent in English
  - grammar information
  - idioms, phrasal verbs, collocations.
  - translation

4. Do you think that now you know and can make a better use of the dictionary regarding?
- \_\_\_\_\_ symbols
  - \_\_\_\_\_ abbreviation
  - \_\_\_\_\_ speed with you find what you are searching

5. Do you think, then, that your ability has developed since the beginning of the year?  
\_\_\_\_\_ YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_ I DON'T KNOW

Why?

6. Do you think that the techniques you have learnt can help you in later years? What for?

7. Further comments