

USING A DICTIONARY IN ADVANCED READING CLASS

(Artikel Hasil Pemikiran)



Antonius Wahyana

**ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION PROGRAM
FACULTY OF LANGUAGE AND ARTS
UNIVERSITAS KRISTEN SATYA WACANA
SALATIGA
2021**

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By Antonius Wahyana
(Email: anton.wahyana@uksw.edu)

Summary

The main objective of most of English courses taught at the university level is to help the students improve their reading skills, particularly those related to the reading of scientific and technical texts. Some of the questions that continually arise are as follows: *Should students be allowed to use dictionaries on exams? Should lecturers teach dictionary skills, or assume that by this time students have already acquired these skills? Should lecturers recommend that students buy a particular dictionary? Should students be restricted to using only monolingual dictionaries or allowed to use bilingual ones as well?* This article aims at answering some of the above questions.

As a matter of fact, there are many different types of dictionaries and a great deal of information can be gleaned from a good dictionary. A dictionary can be a fascinating book to read and study but when used as a reference book for advanced-reading students, several things should be kept in mind. First, unlike some other languages, in English there is no one dictionary that has been approved by an academy or government as the authority. The students should be aware of this and should be able to evaluate the various dictionaries available and select the one that most closely meet their needs. Second, no two dictionaries are exactly alike. The students should thoroughly familiarize themselves with their dictionary so that they can use it quickly and efficiently. Finally, the dictionary should be used only as a last resort. The main objective in reading a text is not to define specific words but to understand the concepts put forward by the writer. The dictionary should be used as a tool to help the students reach that goal.

Keywords: monolingual dictionary, bilingual dictionary, thesaurus, advanced reading

INTRODUCTION

Unlike teaching reading in primary schools and secondary schools, teaching reading at the university level (for undergraduate students) should aimed at helping the students improve their reading skills, particularly those related to the reading of scientific and technical texts. There are a number of questions that continually arise when teaching advanced reading related to the use of the dictionary, such as: *Should students be allowed to use dictionaries in advanced reading exams? Should lecturers teach dictionary skills, or assume that by this time students have already acquired these skills? Should lecturers recommend that students buy a particular dictionary? Should students be restricted to using only monolingual dictionaries or allowed to use bilingual ones as well?* After a number of prolonged and some time heated discussions with colleagues in the department and numerous years of teaching, this article aims at answering some of those questions under the following headings: when to use the dictionary, how to select a dictionary, and how to use the dictionary.

WHEN TO USE THE DICTIONARY?

I feel that in advanced-reading classes, students should not be allowed to use dictionaries in class and on exams; they should be required to do so. At this point in the students learning, they should be interested not in whether they have memorized the definition of a particular word, but in whether they are able to comprehend the main and subordinate ideas presented in the text. If the significance of a specific word in the reading impedes this overall comprehension, then by all means a dictionary should be used. They should also keep in mind that this may be the last English course many students will be exposed to. After completing this course they will probably be required to read books and journals written in English for their science courses, and in doing this

they will have access to dictionaries. The final English course should therefore prepare the students by stimulating their future situation as closely as possible, i.e., by using reading texts similar to those they will be exposed to read and by permitting the use of dictionaries in class and on exams.

However, the most important question about when to use dictionary concerns not the external classroom conditions but rather the internal characteristics of the reading itself: At what point in the reading of a particular text should a reader refer to the dictionary? Most EFL lecturers will have observed a widespread tendency among students to attack a new text by reading word by word from the first sentence, stopping only to reach in desperation for a dictionary (bilingual if they have a choice) at the first word they do not understand. I would propose just the opposite. While I believe in the importance of proper dictionary use as an aid in reading, the dictionary should be used only as a last resort. There are two reasons for this. First, it takes time: time that might better be employed in overall understanding of the text. Efficient reading implies obtaining the greatest amount of information from a text in the smallest amount of time. Second, overuse of the dictionary tends to focus the readers' attention on words, when what they should be concentrating on are ideas or concepts.

What then should the readers do before turning to the "last resort"? The first thing is to continue reading. Frequently, the meaning of a word can be deduced from the context in which it is used. The text may actually give a definition, or cite examples, present analogies or synonyms, or describe the circumstances surrounding the use of the word sufficiently for the readers to know what the word means in the particular context. Or, after reading the complete text, the readers may realize that they have understood the important concepts presented without comprehending the exact meaning of every word.

In either case, the readers' purpose will have been fulfilled without wasting time with a dictionary.

But suppose that after reading the entire text, the readers are unable to deduce the meaning from context and unable to comprehend the text without the meaning of this particular word, what should they do then? They should study the structure of the specific word. The word may have a cognate in the readers' native language, or it may be a compound word which, when broken down into its component parts, is more easily comprehensible (for example: *ashtray, underground, raincoat, oversee, output*, etc.). Or the word may be composed of the root plus several affixes. Students should be helped to recognize roots and decipher the meaning of the entire word by isolating and interpreting the influence each affix has on the root. Does it change the meaning (*legal vs. illegal*), the part of speech (*slow vs. slowly*), the verb tense (*walk vs. walked*)?

If after exhausting these possibilities the students still do not understand the meaning of a word and if this word is vital to the comprehension of the text, then, and only then, they should refer to or consult the dictionary. But which dictionary should they select and how should they use the selected dictionary?

HOW TO SELECT A SUITABLE DICTIONARY?

At this point in the class, as the differences among dictionaries become apparent, students always ask, "Which dictionary is the best?" or "Which dictionary should they buy?" I answer these questions by having the students work in groups to do an exercise. Each group works with a different dictionary and tries to answer as many of the questions as possible. The exercise begins by asking the name of the dictionary, place and date of publication, size, and price. It continues with specific questions about

different information that may and may not be contained in their dictionaries. For example:

1. When was Barack Obama born? (This is to test whether persons are listed in the main section of the dictionary, in a biographical section, or not at all.)
2. Divide the word *reconcile* into syllables.
3. What is the plural of the word *antenna*?
4. What is the origin of the word *electric*?
5. Explain the phrase *over my head*.
6. What countries have common borders with Indonesia? (This is to test whether the dictionary has maps.)
7. Give a definition of *boot* that is used only in England.
8. Which has a larger population, Jakarta or New York? (This is to test for the presence of a gazetteer.)
9. Give a synonym for the word *flare*.
10. What is the atomic weight of *actinium*? (This is to test for the presence of a table of elements.)

When the students have answered as many of the questions as they can with their dictionaries, the exercise is then reviewed not to check the correctness of the answers but rather to discuss the significance of the questions. The place of publication is important not because British dictionaries are superior to American ones or vice versa, but simply because of the difference in spelling and usage of certain words. When using a British dictionary, the readers should look up *labour*, for example, not *labor*. Therefore, if the students will be reading mainly British textbooks and journals, a British dictionary might be better for them to use than an American ones. The date is also important because of the rapid changes in language usage. The dictionary should have been published or

revised no more than 10 or 15 years. Each of the other questions is analyzed from the type of information it is looking for (etymology, word usage, idioms, etc.), and finally the dictionaries are compared by filling out a table below.

No.	Name of Dictionaries	Place of Publication	Date of Publication	Size	Price	Number of Answered Questions
1.						
2.						
3.						
Etc.						

At this point, the students are invited to reconsider their original questions: “Which dictionary is the best?” or “Which dictionary should they buy?” But attention is also drawn to the fact that the answers to these questions may be different. The best dictionary is probably the most recent and most complete, but also the largest and most expensive. Here the students should begin to realize that the selection of their dictionary depends on two important factors, namely: the characteristics of the dictionary and their personal needs and limitations. At this point they might ask themselves: “Can I afford to spend that much money on a dictionary?” “Do I want to carry such a large book to class everyday?” Students should learn to balance these factors and will probably reach the conclusion that a good, medium-sized pocket dictionary will be sufficient for everyday classroom needs, but that a more complete one might be better for use at home and on exams.

At this point, I would like to mention briefly another type of book sometimes confused with the dictionary – the thesaurus. I have found a number of students coming to class with what they thought to be a dictionary but which was, in fact, a thesaurus. To prevent this, the lecturer should point out that the thesaurus is simply a book containing words and their synonyms. While the thesaurus is useful for some purposes, it certainly cannot replace a dictionary.

Another dictionary that should be mentioned is the bilingual dictionary. Like the thesaurus, the bilingual dictionary is a useful tool when used correctly and under the right circumstances. As an aid in advanced reading, however, I find that it frequently acts as hindrance. First, it encourages the readers to be constantly switching back and forth between languages, when at this stage they should understand concepts in the foreign language with as little native-language interference as possible. Second, it promotes the belief that there is always a one-for-one correspondence between the words of different languages, when in fact this is often not the case. Many words can be understood only through understanding the cultural context in which they are used. For example, the Indonesian word “*menggendong*” has no English equivalent. An Indonesian – English dictionary takes around thirty words to give a general explanation of what the word means in English. And third, bilingual dictionaries may contain blatant errors based on connotations words have in specific cultural settings. A good example of this is the word “*propaganda*”. Many English-Indonesian dictionaries give the translation of the Indonesian word propaganda as being the same as in English. However, a definition from a monolingual Indonesian dictionary will describe the word as meaning simply “publicity” or “advertising,” not at all the connotation inherent in the word in English.

HOW TO USE THE DICTIONARY?

By the time that they have reached an advanced-reading course, most students have used a dictionary of some sort, generally to find the meaning of a word in their native language or a translation of a word in a foreign language. But few students have used a monolingual English dictionary, and few are aware that dictionaries contain a great deal of information other than definitions. Some time should therefore be spent in helping

students discover what kinds of information different dictionaries contain and how they can find what they are looking for.

I usually begin my advanced-reading class with a brainstorming session in which I ask students what types of information they think can be found in a monolingual English dictionary. Their answers are listed on the whiteboard. Then I distribute several different monolingual English dictionaries and have them work in groups to verify the list on the whiteboard and add to it. In this way, students discover that in addition to definitions of words, a dictionary may contain: pronunciation rules, division of words into syllables, the accepted spelling (or spellings) of a word, the ways in which a word may function in a sentence (as a noun, verb, etc), synonyms and antonyms, the etymology or history of a word, the meanings of idiomatic phrases in which the word is used, the usage of a word (slang, formal, archaic, poetic, etc.), irregular forms of the word (past tense, plural, etc.), information about persons and places (either in the main part of the dictionary or in special sections at the back), pictures, maps, tables, abbreviations, and rules for spelling, punctuation, and capitalization

Also, in comparing the lists produced by the different groups, students begin to realize that dictionaries are all alike. This discovery will be expanded later through exercises in dictionary evaluation and selection. At this point, several ideas regarding efficient dictionary use should be emphasized below.

1. If the students cannot find a word listed in the main section, it may be listed elsewhere. Abbreviations are frequently found in a separate section at the beginning of the dictionary, place names in a gazetteer at the end, and persons in a separate section for biographies.

2. The word the students are looking for may be an irregular form or have a prefix. Look for the root. For example, *ate* would be listed under the infinitive form *eat*; *retrain* under the root *train*. The dictionary may have a separate table listing irregular verb forms to help the readers identify the infinitive.
3. When trying to decide which definition is appropriate, remember the way the word is used in the sentence. For example, *set* can be used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective. Do not waste time reading the verb definitions if the word in the sentence functions as a noun.
4. Be careful to choose the definition that fits the way the word is used in the reading text. Do not select the slang definition of *cool* if what is being read is a physics text.
5. Idiomatic phrases usually appear at the end of the entry for the main word of the phrase. For example, the phrase *under one's thumb* would probably not have an independent listing, but rather be found at the end of the listing for *thumb*.

CONCLUSION

There are many different types of dictionaries and a great deal of information can be gleaned from a good dictionary. Indeed, a dictionary can be a fascinating book to read and study. But when used as a reference book for advanced-reading students, several things should be kept in mind. First, unlike some other languages, in English there is no one dictionary that has been approved by an academy or government as the authority. The students should be aware of this and should be able to evaluate the various dictionaries available and select the one that most closely meet their needs. Second, no two dictionaries are exactly alike. The students should thoroughly familiarize themselves with their dictionary so that they can use it quickly and efficiently. Finally, the dictionary should be used only as a last resort. Remember, the main objective in reading a text is

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