

## **YOUNG LEARNERS AND ONE PARTICULAR STUDY SKILL: USING THE DICTIONARY**

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Following McCarthy (1990), "It is the experience of most language teachers that the single, biggest component of any language course is vocabulary. No matter how well the students learn grammar, no matter how successfully the sounds of L2 are mastered, without words to express a wide range of meanings, communication in an L2 just cannot happen in any meaningful way. And yet vocabulary often seems to be the least systematised and the least well catered for of all the aspects of learning a foreign language."

The activities described below have been designed for young learners of English as a foreign language and try to show ways of becoming familiar with dictionaries. They have a mainly didactic and educational character. In no case have we indulged in more serious or scientific ways of studying dictionaries or the lexicon of a given language. Neither lexicology nor lexicography are our aim here.

According to Jiménez (1956), dictionaries, apart from being a very useful tool for helping acquire linguistic competence in the foreign or second language, can contribute to the child's development of autonomy in school tasks. We agree with him in that it is necessary to make young learners aware of this fact and to show them how to use this resource through different pedagogical techniques. So, this article is an adaptation of Jiménez (1956) to the teaching of English as a foreign language to children. An efficient use of the dictionary will make them resourceful when faced with a new word with respect to its meaning(s) and it will help them to identify the different types of meanings, their use, the spelling of the word, its relationship with other words, etc. However, we have observed that, in general, this type of work is left to free experimentation on the part of young learners, in other words, to trial and error. The end result is often that children stop using the dictionary because they find it difficult and unsatisfactory and also because frequently it can interrupt the flow of reading of a short story, a simple reading text, a short poem, a limerick, etc.

We think that it is necessary to help children use dictionaries as much as possible. But, of course, to do that, they must learn to use this linguistic tool through methodical training. The methodology used should be attractive and varied.

There are several techniques:

- learning the way the alphabet is organized in the dictionary,
- interpreting abbreviations and symbols,
- understanding relationships among words,
- choosing the correct meaning (contextualization),

- understanding illustrations and diagrams,
- discovering the “mysterious” functioning of the lexicon and the building up of words, that is, derivations and compound words,
- being aware of the most important affixes (prefixes and suffixes) and some of their most common meanings, or
- solving the problems caused by words that do not appear explicitly in the dictionary (plurals, conjugated verbal forms, certain derived words, like, for example, “dehumanization”, basic or classical roots of words, etc.)

No doubt, children will already be familiar with this type of book, either because they have seen it being used by their teacher at school or because they have one (or a number) at home. Therefore, it will probably not be a totally unknown element. Nevertheless, the first serious, educational and pedagogical contacts with the dictionary require a certain solemnity. We should design special lessons for it. In any case, if young learners have done activities like the ones described in Solé (1988a, 1988b), they may well feel a certain impatience, and expect positive results from the first moment.

### **ACTIVITIES:**

(1) You know that in dictionaries words are ordered alphabetically, so you will find words starting with “a” at the beginning; the ones that start with “z” will be at the end and, for the same reason, the ones beginning with “m” will be in the middle. Let's play a game: try to open the dictionary where you can find words whose initial letter is “p”. If you are right, I'll give you three points; if you open the dictionary and you find words beginning with “o” or “q” - the letters immediately before and after “p” - you will get one point. Go on playing by looking for the location of words beginning with “c”, “t”, “f” or “v”.

(2) Look up the word “European”. It will be amongst words starting with “e”. Have you found this block of words? As there are lots of words, let's look at the second letter, “u”; it is one of the last in this block, so let's go towards it. Have you found this subset? There are quite a lot of words here too. Let's look for the third letter. Which is it? Let's try to locate it in the corresponding column. I am sure you will find it because there aren't many words in this section. Read its meaning and comment on it.

Is there a diagram or illustration of the word on the page?

(3) Do not close the dictionary. Look at the top right and the top left of the page that contains “European” (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English, 4th edition. From now on, OALDCE). There are two words, “eurhythmics” and “even”. They are referential words; they show that on the page you can find these two words, one at the beginning and the other at the end, and that in between there are all the words that can be ordered alphabetically.

(4) According to the alphabet, locate one or more words between a given pair.

GO    hen    inn    KILOGRAM  
RED    \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    RUN  
EPISODE    \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    ERROR

(5) Write down words that can be found between two referential words in a particular dictionary. (The examples here are taken from the OALDCE).

DILL    \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    DINE  
PAUSE    \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    PAY  
TOW    \_\_\_\_    \_\_\_\_    TOY

(6) Fill in the blanks with words that you can find in a dictionary between the following referential words: "nephew" and "nettle".

NEPHEW		NETTLE	
nephew	4.- _____	8.- _____	
1.- _____	5.- _____	9.- _____	
2.- _____	6.- _____	10.- _____	
		11.- _____	
			nettle.

(There are eleven words in all in the OALDCE).

(7) Answer TRUE or FALSE:

- (a) the word ROAM will be between ROAD and ROB.
- (b) the word SKI will be between SKIM and SKIN.
- (c) the word TOURIST will be between TOUGH and TOW.
- (d) the word GARLIC will be between GAP and GARDEN.
- (e) the word FALL will be between FACE and FALL.

(8) Between LACK and LAST you can find:

	true	false
lane		
lamb		
lark		

	true	false
lane		
lamb		
lark		

	true	false
landing		
labour		
lab		

(9) Write down two words preceding and following the items shown. The words should have the same first two letters and be in alphabetical order.

\_\_\_\_\_ ELEPHANT \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ GROW \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ PAST \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ BRANCH \_\_\_\_\_

(10) Fill in the following grid.

What should I do if when I look up a word in a dictionary I see the following referential words? Tick where necessary.

- Key:
- ° Go forwards in the dictionary
  - Ü Go backwards
  - ⊠ Stop because you are on the right page

I'm looking for	Referential words	°	Ü	α
intentional	integrity/intent			
Nordic	note/notify			
now	notion/now			
dissolve	distant/distract			
land	landscape/_____			
lawyer	_____/_____			
magic	_____/magnet			
partial	part/_____			
lament	machismo/mafia			

If young learners go through activities of the type described above they will achieve a good basic understanding of the mechanics of a learning tool as useful as the dictionary. Let's have a look now at some exercises for beginners of a lexical nature.

- In order to understand the key to dictionary entries.

For instance, if your pupils are reading a text or short story, etc., select four or five words of different complexity or different function; this will provide a basis for getting to know them better through the dictionary. Let's suppose that the words are "do", "literature" and "ring". They could appear in the following short reading text:

"John was about to do the dishes while his brother was reading some *literature* on gardening. There was a ring at the door. John went through the narrow corridor to find out who it was."

We look up the word "do" in the dictionary. It is quite a complex entry and, therefore, in any dictionary we are bound to find different abbreviations, keys or explanations of the word.

What does "aux v." mean? And "neg."? And "pt." or "pp."? What about "Tn." "Dn.n," "Dn.pr.," "phr.v.," "imfl." or "Brit. s."? (all of them found in the OALDCE). All dictionaries include a list of abbreviations and comments on the symbols they use. Let's see who finds the list first! What does "lat" mean? The abbreviations are also ordered alphabetically. It is interesting to make fuller comments on the abbreviations. What are hyphens or other signs meant to mean?

Select an informal expression like "He did his back in lifting heavy furniture," explain what it means and give other examples of the expression.

Comment on the syntactic and grammatical observations, especially the ones to do with irregularities in the conjugation to make them clear and to highlight the correct spelling.

Conjugate the verb in different tenses, since it is irregular.

What does the abbreviation “der.” mean? Pay attention to derived words, to the way they are built up and to the affixes they show, like “undo,” “undone.” Do they look similar to the basic word, or are they very different?

Comment on the words that appear following the abbreviations “syn” and “ant.” Are “undo” and “undone” synonyms of “do” or “done,” or are they antonyms?

Now, let's look at the word “literature.” Does the dictionary give us the classical term it derives from? What does the symbol “n” mean”? Let's have a look at the meanings. The OALDCE offers several possibilities:

1. (a) writings that are valued as works of art, esp. fiction, drama and poetry (as opposed to technical books and journalism).
- (b) the activity of writing, or studying this kind of writing.
- (c) writings of this kind from a particular country or period.
2. writings on a particular subject.
3. pamphlets or leaflets.

Which of these meanings fits our reading text? Comment on some of the other meanings and write a sentence using meanings 1 (a, b, c), 2, and 3. What does polysemy mean? Look for derived words and possible synonyms.

Where should we look up the word “ring”? It can be a noun or a verb. Let's read some of the meanings for both. Make it clear that when “ring” refers to the silver or golden object we put on our finger a possible figurative derivation is “ringlet” and when it means “make a bell sound” it can have derivations such as “ringer” or “ringing”.

We think that if these activities are carried out according to a systematic plan and with the care that initiating a whole cycle of activities requires, the benefit gained by using the dictionary and its frequency of use by the child will be highly positive. If this very useful element in the EFL classroom is introduced with care, we will have taken a very important step in emphasizing the importance of vocabulary and of the value of dictionaries in schools.

Nevertheless, since the topic is wide, and a large number of activities related to it have been devised, we do not want to finish this discussion without commenting on some other problems that young learners may find in the course of their schoolwork. Sooner or later the child will have to face them.

-Words that do not appear as entries in a dictionary: plurals, conjugated verbal forms, adverbs ending in -ly, Christian names, etc.

-Chains of closed definitions, or definitions which are difficult to understand:

Incorporate      aggregate      unite

-Discover lexical relationships looking for the right meaning of a text built up with words with different meanings.

-Compare the information given in two or more dictionaries: observe the layout, the diagrams or drawings, the number of entries, the different meanings of words, derivation, synonyms, special meanings, idioms, etc.

-Different registers, informal, familiar or regional meanings.

-Poetic entries and figurative or metaphorical meanings.

-Semantic analysis, which at first should involve grids using simple distinctive criteria:

	part of head	a bird	a person
beak	YES	YES	YES
mouth	YES	NO	YES

## ASSESSMENT

It is interesting to evaluate the degree of acquisition of these techniques which, we think, constitute an important working tool at school. Tests should include:

(a) information that teachers gather about the development of their activities, the effectiveness of the programme and of their objectives in designing the tasks.

(b) a basis for establishing feed-back criteria; these can start new procedures or confirm past experiences.

(c) information about the students and their ways of considering these techniques.

The tests that the young learner must face should be related to previous classroom work and to the aims and objectives according to which the techniques were designed; they must integrate knowledge which may have been presented in bits and pieces through different activities and exercises. In the first years, the criterion of quality must prevail over that of quantity.

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