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DICTIONARY USE IN ESL COURSES

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A foreign student in the United States for secondary or higher education finds that an all-English desk dictionary is one of his best friends. Actually, he can hardly survive in his academic training without one.

Back home the typical foreign student developed the habit of consulting a bi-

lingual dictionary (English and his native language) to answer questions about words and usage. But for pursuing courses in American educational institutions this habit should be broken as soon as possible; he must be encouraged to switch to an all-English dictionary. As a rule, the contexts for presenting information about English words in bilingual dictionaries are hopelessly inadequate. Furthermore, the use of a bilingual dictionary reinforces a long-standing notion on the part of many students: that there is a one-to-one correspondence between English words on the one hand and words in the students' native language on the other — a completely false notion.

All students of English as a second language (ESL) know that a dictionary contains meanings of words and correct spellings, and they consult it mostly for these purposes. Relatively few of them draw on the other useful information to be found there. A unit of study based on dictionary usage at the beginning of a reading and/or composition course is well worth the time and effort. Even the alphabetic principle in dictionary arrangement is not entirely clear to some

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students, especially those from Asian countries and the Middle East.

A study unit devoted to familiarizing ESL students with the dictionary can be conducted best by means of a workbook on study skills, with all members of the class using the same dictionary. A good workbook explains what the dictionary contains and how the contents are arranged; it also provides exercises for practice in locating specific information: spelling, pronunciation, syllable division,

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derivation, meaning, part of speech, usage, synonyms, and the like.

In general an ESL student goes to the dictionary for the same reasons as an American student, but the questions he wants answered are usually less sophisticated than those of the American. Whereas the American student may decide to look up *inscrutable* to see if the ending is *ible* or *able*, the ESL student is more likely to look up a word like *fitting* to see if it contains one or two *t*'s. Spelling rules can be and are learned, but I hear a frequent comment that it is easier to look in the dictionary than remember the rules. Also because he lacks security in the language, particularly in reading and writing, the ESL student's need for frequent dic-

tionary consultation is greater than the American's.

Inasmuch as I have to look in a dictionary to check word divisions, I can do no less than insist that my students do likewise. Some ESL students (but not all, by any means) are so intent on keeping their right margins straight, they divide words at the end of the line too often and, in many cases, incorrectly. Because of the average ESL student's "shaky" command of the language, it is almost impossible for him to internalize the rules for English word division completely.

Capitalization of proper nouns, a lesser problem, can be dealt with by referring to the dictionary, too, and this should be encouraged. If for no other reason than accurate spelling the ESL teacher can perform a valuable service to the student by helping him develop "the dictionary habit."

Provided the ESL student does not switch back and forth from one dictionary to another or switch around from one to another, he can usually learn the conventions for marking pronunciation in a single dictionary and make good use of them. At least he can locate the syllable of a word with the heaviest stress, and by studying the pronunciation key he can learn to recognize the various indicators of vowel and consonant quality. However, in quite a few cases, the dictionary symbols tend to confuse the student, unless he has guidance from a native speaker of English, because some of the sounds marked are not in the student's repertory. In his non-fluent command of the language he substitutes the nearest equivalent from his native language for English sounds.

More so than for spelling and pronunciation, the ESL student values the dictionary for the meanings of words given. Using the same dictionary all the time is

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the best practice, but when this is not feasible, the student must be cautioned repeatedly about the order of listing different meanings. Some dictionaries list the earliest meanings first and the most recent meaning last; others list the most common current meaning first, which is then traced back to earlier meanings.

Synonyms and antonyms, if they are familiar words, provide good supplementary clues to the definitions stated. The part-of-speech label — noun, verb, adjective, etc. — helps to identify common occurrences, and the usage examples in phrases and sentences illustrate words in context. These are all aids to understanding the meanings of words and their customary use in sentences. The ESL student grasps the utility of these aids slowly at first, but he picks up speed with repeated "visits" to the dictionary.

Besides the meanings of words in ordinary usage, the ESL student consults the dictionary to locate meanings of idioms, two-part verbs, and slang that he encounters in reading and in conversations with Americans. For example, he may want to find the meaning of *pull one's leg*, *pass the buck*, *call off*, *get by*, *nitty gritty*, and *goon*. These expressions are all familiar to the American student, but usually unfamiliar to the ESL student. Similarly, the ESL student refers to the dictionary for

information about important persons and places, particularly in regard to the United States.

The ESL student makes occasional use of the other dictionary references: usage levels — formal, colloquial, slang, etc.; etymologies; labels for specialized fields — Chemistry, Economics, Psychology, etc.; and editorial matter — tables of weights and measures, list of U. S. colleges and universities, etc. Words related to the one being defined, however, are given special attention. In English there is a fairly complex machinery for word derivation among the major word classes by means of affixes: nouns from verbs (*govern-govern-ment*), verbs from nouns (*beauty-beautify*), adjectives from nouns (*dust-dusty*), nouns from adjectives (*ill-illness*), adjectives from verbs (*agree-agreeable*), verbs from adjectives (*sharp-sharpen*), adverbs from adjectives and nouns (*clear-clearly*, *instant-instantly*). As a native speaker of the language, the American student has no difficulty with this kind of elaboration. But the ESL student makes frequent mistakes in choosing the appropriate affix: *approvement*, for example, instead of *approval*.

The lack of adequate competence in language skills puts the average foreign student at a disadvantage. The dictionary does not solve all of his language problems, but it serves him better than any other single reference tool he can own.