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## **Facilitating Learner Autonomy: Reading and Effective Dictionary Use for Lexical Development**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Effective dictionary use facilitates reading and subsequently, vocabulary knowledge development. Reading, especially extensive reading, has time and again been proven to be highly effective for both receptive and productive lexical development. Possessing control over a large vocabulary is essential for language competence – be it L1, L2, or L3. However, it is impractical to expect students to learn, and teachers to teach, all the vocabulary needed strictly within a classroom setting. There are simply too many words to learn. A certain level of autonomy and accountability on the student's part therefore becomes necessary. This paper discusses how learner autonomy can be facilitated, primarily within the context of reading and lexical development. The pertinence of learner autonomy and dictionary use as well as selection, and a review of past studies pertaining to the use of various types of dictionaries are discussed, followed by pedagogical suggestions. The authors also present a post-reading vocabulary worksheet designed for autonomous learners, which is best used with online dictionaries and thus relevant to the technologies available today. This paper is of significance to language educators and learners, course designers, and researchers engaged in language acquisition.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to Krashen (1989), there are excellent reasons for devoting attention to vocabulary: “First there are practical reasons. A large vocabulary is, of course, essential for mastery of a language. Second, language acquirers know this; they carry dictionaries

with them, not grammar books, and regularly report that lack of vocabulary is a major problem.” (p. 440).

Sokmen (1997) opined that expecting students to learn all the vocabulary they need strictly within a classroom setting is impossible because there are simply too many words to learn within a set time limit and as such, with regards to vocabulary expansion, a higher level of autonomy and accountability on the student’s part is necessary. In other words, language learners are likely to benefit from independent study and as put forward by Luu (2011), it is essential for students to realise that success in learning depends heavily on their own efforts, in tandem with Scharle and Szabo’s (2000) emphasis that success in learning depends very much on learners taking responsibility for their own learning.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Learner Autonomy and Vocabulary Acquisition**

Nunan (2000) and Benson (2001) suggested that learner autonomy is the ability to put one’s own study into effect (cited in Luu, 2011). According to Barillaro (2011), defining the term ‘learner autonomy’ is no simple task as there is little consensus on its precise meaning and it has been defined in many ways over time – the following are definitions of learner autonomy commonly found in much of existing literature:

- “ ... a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person.” (Dam et al., 1990, p. 102)
- “ ... Autonomy is a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action ... The concept of autonomy ... implies that the learner enjoys a high degree of freedom. But it is important to insist that the freedoms conferred by autonomy are never absolute, always conditional and constrained.” (Little, 1991, p. 4-5)
- “ ... an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning.” (Dickinson, 1995, p. 167)

In addition, in describing learner autonomy as being conscious of available sources of help, Luu (2011) illustrated that when a student asks his or her teacher for assistance in terms of explaining the meaning of a new or unfamiliar word, it is regarded as teacher-dependence whereas in the case when a student asks the teacher to confirm the accuracy of the synonym(s) that he or she has selected for a new or unfamiliar word after referring to a dictionary or other sources of reference, it is considered as learner autonomy. Luu elaborated that learner autonomy actually provides great relief for students in terms of vocabulary learning as, apart from catering to the individual needs of learners at all levels, it also affords them the following:

- 1) Enhancement of motivation which leads to more effective learning
- 2) Provision of more opportunities in terms of language communication
- 3) Mastery of the basic skills necessary for long-term learning

Cotterall (2000), in her study of two short courses which incorporated measures aimed at fostering learner autonomy, concluded that not only was motivation enhanced, but that learners were found to be able to manage their learning in ways which contributed to task performance. Barillaro (2012) noted that further to strategy use, teacher-learner dialogue or discussion is another important component; it helps learners see the connection between the learning tasks that they execute and the reasons for executing the tasks, which helps them to better understand the learning process at hand. Teacher-learner dialogues or discussions also contribute towards helping learners reflect on what they know and what they do not, a process which assists them in gradually gaining the confidence needed for effective learning to take place.

### **Independent Reading and Dictionary Use**

Nunan (1999) noted that independent vocabulary learning is largely comprised of guessing from context and dictionary use, an observation supported by Seddigh and Shokrpur (2012) who, in their research which sought to explore the vocabulary learning strategies of university students in Iran, found that guessing from context and dictionary use were the most frequently used strategies for independent vocabulary learning among their participants. Xia (2007) obtained similar findings in a research conducted at China's Jiujiang University, in that participants were in favour of guessing from context and dictionary use. Seddigh and Shokrpur (2012) emphasised that it is important to obtain a clearer picture of what learners prefer with regards to strategies for vocabulary learning as this does not only impact classroom methodology and curriculum design, but is also significant in terms of developing learner autonomy.

Extensive reading has long been considered a pedagogically efficient approach as two activities, reading and vocabulary acquisition, occur at the same time (Huckin & Coady, 1999). Additionally, not only is the approach pleasant and motivating, but it also provides opportunities for learners to meet words in their context of use as well as facilitates learner autonomy (Thornbury, 2002) and according to Thomson (1996), allows learners to enjoy some measure of responsibility for their learning. Nation (2001) asserted that particularly in EFL contexts, "the use of reading and other input sources may be the only practical options for out of class language development for some learners." (p. 155)

In line with this, Waring and Nation (2004) observed that recent research on incidental vocabulary learning via reading has shown that it can be a primary source of learning, on condition that it is part of a substantial and sustained reading programme; in terms of more effective vocabulary learning. It was also observed that direct vocabulary teaching and learning methods are helpful.

Hence, autonomy is in essence developed through tasks and activities that engage learners on their own terms and allow them to actively and effectively exploit their linguistic resources in negotiation of meaning. Homstad and Thorson (2000) argued that

independent learning is an important goal, and that learners are expected to be risk-takers and to be active participants in their own learning.

These expectations can be met through the use of a suitable dictionary and according to Kirkness (2004), the dictionary has long functioned as an important if not primary tool of information on language for all members of literate societies with regards to the form, meaning and use of words in their own language or in another. Chambers (1999) perceived dictionary use as a life-skill, one that requires practice and can potentially result in a higher level of linguistic competence. Similarly, Asher (1999) viewed dictionary use as an important life-skill, as essential as literacy in information and communications technology, and described it as a “gateway to independent learning” (p. 66).

In highlighting the increased learner autonomy associated with dictionary use, Gairns and Redman (1986) emphasised the following: “A learner who makes good use of a dictionary will be able to continue learning outside the classroom, and this will give him considerable autonomy about the decisions he makes about his own learning.” (p. 79) This is supported by Leaney (2007) who stressed that encouraging learners to tap efficiently into the information provided in a dictionary is one of the best ways of moulding them into independent, lifelong language learners.

Language instructors, meanwhile, are more fragmented on the issue of pairing reading activities with dictionary use. Some of them perceive dictionaries to be beneficial to learners because they offer considerable lexical benefits whereas others are concerned that the dictionary consultation process itself may hamper a student’s overall learning process. As Critchley (1998) pointed out, learners may lose sight of contextual meaning as a whole when they refer to a dictionary for every word that they do not understand or are not familiar with while reading. Additionally, Knight (1994) as well as Luppescu and Day (1993) noted that reading rate is substantially slowed down with dictionary use during reading. This however does not detract from the fact that word knowledge is very likely gained when learners consult a dictionary. Thus a reasonable option, especially in an extensive reading setting whereby interruptions during the reading process should be minimised, is to encourage post-reading direct vocabulary study (of target words) that incorporate active dictionary use on the learner’s part.

### **Monolingual, Bilingual, or Bilingualised Dictionaries?**

Studies regarding monolingual and bilingual dictionaries are few, and according to Hayati and Fattahzadeh (2006), this paucity is surprising given the significant role of dictionaries in language learning. What is clear however, with regards to whether monolingual dictionaries are more useful or effective than bilingual dictionaries and vice versa, is that existing literature reveals contrasting views and a consensus has yet to be reached.

Nation (2003) explained that while bilingual dictionaries are easier to use because they provide L1 synonyms, monolingual dictionaries are richer as they normally contain a wealth of useful information and in an effort to make such dictionaries more accessible for lower proficiency language learners, the definitions provided are often within a controlled vocabulary covering approximately 2,000 word families, a receptive coverage attainable after studying English as a foreign language for five to six years. Laufer and

Melamed (1994) highlighted that one of the most comprehensive studies on dictionary use comprising over 1,000 learners in seven countries by Atkins and Knowles (1990) revealed that a majority (recorded at 75%) of the research's participants favoured bilingual dictionaries. This preference, however, did not necessarily translate to bilingual dictionaries being more helpful. As observed by Laufer and Melamed (1994), the research (Atkins & Knowles, 1990) found that the monolingual dictionary actually proved more helpful in assisting users in terms of finding relevant information because a monolingual entry generally provides more detailed and precise information about a word or lexical item as compared to a bilingual entry; bilingual entries are also known to be misleading due to the use of basic one-word translations. Bejoint and Moulin (1987) put forth that bilingual dictionaries are suitable for cursory consultations, while monolingual dictionaries are more difficult to use but have the extra merit of introducing the user directly into the lexical system of the L2.

Baxter (1980) commented that a monolingual dictionary, apart from supplying the means to employ definitions, also demonstrates definitions as an alternative to the use of lexical items. He was of the opinion that more encouragement should be accorded to the use of monolingual dictionaries, primarily because monolingual dictionaries aid in the development of vocabulary knowledge and consequently fluency by offering varying definitions in context, whereas bilingual dictionaries often lean towards single-word translation equivalents that may not be contextually appropriate. Tang (1997) projected a similar opinion in observing that bilingual dictionaries may include too little necessary information in their entries and that they can contribute to excessive dependence on one-to-one word translations. On the other hand, Harvey and Yuill (1997) pointed out that the monolingual dictionary can be effectively used to develop learners' vocabulary knowledge due to its use of reliable and contemporary sentences as examples, drawn from corpus data that supply information concerning meaning, grammar and usage.

Dziapa (2001), in a study involving Polish learners of English, compared the effectiveness of the monolingual dictionary and the bilingual dictionary through measures of vocabulary acquisition via reading with the aid of dictionaries. Two groups of learners were involved, categorised into beginners and intermediates and within each group, participants were randomly assigned to one of two dictionary-use conditions: utilisation of a monolingual dictionary or utilisation of a bilingual dictionary. They were supplied with texts to be read with the help of the dictionaries and were subsequently tested on lexical tasks (without dictionary help) involving items from the given texts. It was found that on the whole, using a bilingual dictionary was more advantageous for those in the beginners' group. However, as far as specific lexical tasks are concerned, the monolingual dictionary proved to be more relevant and helpful in tasks which required the provision of meanings or definitions.

Meanwhile, Asgari and Ghazali (2011) investigated the vocabulary learning strategies of ESL students at Universiti Putra Malaysia and came to a conclusion that aside from incidental vocabulary learning through reading and the use of English language media (such as songs, movies and television programmes), a common strategy employed by the participants of the study was the use of monolingual dictionaries. The researchers suggested that an explanation for the common use of monolingual dictionaries among these students is the advancement of a new educational tenet in Malaysia which focuses on independent learning.

In contrast, Thompson (1987) claimed that the grammatical structures employed in monolingual dictionaries complicate comprehension, in that the structures make understanding of the given word meanings or definitions difficult, and drew a conclusion that “monolingual dictionaries are simply not cost-effective for many learners in terms of rewards (correct choice of word) versus effort” (p. 284). Furthermore, he believed that all the information supplied by a monolingual dictionary can be equally provided in a bilingual dictionary. Similarly, Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984) and Yorio’s (1971) studies showed that learners displayed a distinct preference for bilingual dictionaries when they were given a choice between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. In defending the virtue of the bilingual dictionary for its role in helping learners determine the right answer, Yorio (*ibid.*), however, simultaneously admitted to the bilingual dictionary’s shortcoming, stating that it can be imprecise (therefore implying its unreliability): “Although frequently inaccurate or misleading, the bilingual dictionary seems to give them security of a concrete answer, while the monolingual dictionary often forces them to guess the meaning, adding more doubts to the already existing ones.” (p. 113)

More recently, Golavar et al. (2012) investigated, within an ESP framework, the effect of using monolingual and bilingual dictionaries among a group of 80 Iranian students at the Khoramshar Maritime University; the group was divided into two subgroups, with Group A utilising monolingual dictionaries and Group B bilingual dictionaries. The study reported that Group B delivered a better performance on the final test than Group A, with the former recording an average score of 18.24 and the latter an average score of 17.63.

At the Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz, Hayati and Fattahzadeh (2006) conducted a study within an EFL setting in which 60 Iranian students were divided into two groups and given a text to read for meaning, with one group utilising monolingual dictionaries and the other bilingual dictionaries. The researchers employed testing measures to ensure that the target words in the text were unknown to the participants. The results of the study indicated a significant difference in terms of reading rate; the participants who utilised monolingual dictionaries took nearly twice as long to read the given text as did the participants in the other group who utilised bilingual dictionaries. However, with regards to vocabulary gains, participants from both groups learnt nearly the same number of words while reading regardless of whether they used a monolingual or bilingual dictionary, and although there was a slight difference between both groups’ performances in the vocabulary tests, it was not significant.

According to Laufer and Melamed (1994), L2 learners, even those who have attained a good level of proficiency in the target language and who have been taught academic skills such as dictionary use, still demonstrate dependence on bilingual dictionaries. In a survey on dictionary use, Piotrowski (1989) concluded that foreign language learners, irrespective of their proficiency level in the target language, will continue to rely on bilingual dictionaries for as long as they utilise dictionaries. As such, Laufer and Melamed (1994) advanced the following: “If this is the consumer reality, then a hybrid dictionary which contains the two types of information (monolingual and bilingual) seems to be the most appropriate product of lexicographers’ effort.” (p. 566)

Hence, over the years bilingualised dictionaries have been produced and studies conducted in order to evaluate its use. Hartmann (1994), in a comprehensive study

examining user reactions to exemplars of this dictionary type, conducted interviews and employed direct observation during a reading task and found that users at four different L2 proficiency levels valued the juxtaposition of L2 definitions and L1 translation equivalents. Laufer and Melamed (1994) cautioned, however, that this does not necessarily imply that the bilingualised dictionary is different from the monolingual and bilingual dictionaries in terms of its usefulness. Laufer and Kimmel (1997) suggested 'dictionary usefulness' as the extent to which a dictionary is helpful in supplying the relevant and necessary information to its user while 'dictionary usability' can be characterised as the user's willingness to use the dictionary in question as well as his or her satisfaction from using it. In Nuccorini's (1992) research, the paradox between dictionary usefulness and dictionary usability is clearly illustrated in that learners admitted to the usefulness of the information in the monolingual dictionary in helping them understand the meaning of words, but nevertheless continued to use the bilingual dictionary more often.

A hybrid of the monolingual dictionary and the bilingual dictionary appears to be an appropriate compromise, and studies have shown the bilingualised dictionary to be effective (e.g. Thumb, 2004; Laufer & Kimmel, 1997). However, as pointed out by Pujol, Masnou and Corrius (2008), the very structure of the bilingualised dictionary which seeks to promote autonomy in the use of the monolingual dictionary has proven to be a hindrance for learners because as demonstrated by Thumb (2004) and Laufer and Kimmel (1997), users of bilingualised dictionaries often dismiss the information given in the target language and go directly to the translation instead. In other words, the fact that bilingualised dictionaries include translations alongside monolingual definitions (or definitions in the target language) significantly diminishes the potential for immersion in the target language.

Bilingualised dictionaries serve to bridge the gap between monolingual dictionaries and bilingual dictionaries, and allow users immediate access to information in their native language. While this may work towards increasing learners' confidence, it does not immerse learners in the target language as much as monolingual dictionaries do. In addition, according to Pujol, Masnou and Corrius (2008), most bilingualised dictionaries are designed for upper intermediate or advanced learners of EFL, an observation which complements Lew's (2004) suggestion that the bilingualised dictionary in general has a confusing effect on learners at the lower proficiency levels, most likely due to information overload.

## **PEDAGOGICAL SUGGESTIONS AND CONCLUSION**

Fundamentally, it appears that monolingual dictionaries are more favourable, especially in terms of accuracy and richness of data, suitability for all levels of proficiency, as well as for the purpose of immersing learners in the target language. However, regardless of the type of dictionary used, it is essential for language instructors to:

- 1) verify the dictionary's quality, usefulness and usability

- 2) conduct training sessions to help learners become more competent dictionary users

Dictionary consultation, although basically an uncomplicated process, is still a skill and not all language learners are competent users of the dictionary, including adult tertiary-level students. Of essence, particularly at the initial stage, is familiarisation with a dictionary's structures – knowing where and how information is presented in the dictionary.

It is also recommended that easily confused vocabulary, multiple-meaning words, heteronyms and any lexis that can potentially pose confusion to language learners be discerned with further explanation to complement autonomous learning, especially at the lower tiers (e.g. lower-intermediate level).

Also, as discussed earlier, while it is true that a combination of incidental and intentional learning methods can be more fruitful for vocabulary knowledge development than relying on incidental means alone, it is pertinent that the dictionary consultation process does not interrupt a student's reading process as this may hamper learning. Thus, a reasonable option would be to encourage post-reading direct vocabulary study incorporating active dictionary use on the student's part; for instance, vocabulary worksheets containing target words from the reading materials (see Figure 1) can be prepared and distributed on a daily or weekly basis for students to complete with the aid of a monolingual dictionary:

**Word: cripple**  
**Form: Verb**

*\*Listen to the pronunciation of the word and repeat after it.*

1] **cripple** means:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

2] Make an original English sentence using the word **cripple**:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

3] In your national language, **cripple** means:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

4] Make an original sentence in your national language using the word **cripple**:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

5] Other possible **forms** of the word **cripple**:  
 \_\_\_\_\_

*\*Possible with the use of an electronic or online dictionary.*

**Figure 1.** Vocabulary worksheet sample item (based on Rosszell's (2007) design) (see also Tan, 2016)



Another matter worth considering is advocating the use of electronic and online or web-based dictionaries, widely available in monolingual, bilingual and bilingualised versions. Researchers have discovered that learners are more inclined towards such dictionaries as they indicate more willingness to look up words using these as compared to printed dictionaries (Dziemianko, 2010; de Schryver, 2003; Nesi, 2000), a point worth noting when dictionary use is intended as part of promoting language learning.

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