

Dictionary as an Effective Resource in Teaching and Learning of English as a Second Language: Complementing Instructions

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Abstract

Second language learning requires conscious and persistent efforts on the part of the learner, to achieve significant proficiency. Generally, students show complacency towards learning a new language, as a result of frustrating factors such as unfamiliar vocabularies, mixing words with different textual meanings, difficulties in adopting the mechanics of effective writing and others. The dictionary as a learning resource, helps in ameliorating these challenges; serving as a complementary aid for learners, and even teachers in the choice of pedagogic strategies. The methodology adopts a quantitative design in assessing the effectiveness of the use of dictionaries, amongst secondary school teachers and students in Nigeria, using appropriate questionnaires. The result revealed the indispensable role of the dictionary as a learning resource in an ESL environment, and its maximal benefits when students are proactively trained to use it.

Keywords: language, dictionary, learning resource, teaching and learning, English as a second language

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Effective teaching and learning in a second language situation demands innovative strategies to complement the traditional mode of chalking and telling, using the teacher's manuals, texts, audio-visual and pictorial aids in the classroom. Such innovative abilities include media aids, ICT-driven instructions and other media aids, and the dictionary. To achieve communicative ability in a language such as English, one requires proficiency in the vocabularies of such key areas of the language -education, social interaction, recreation and entertainment, specialised registers, tourism and the environment (Spirina, 2014). The teacher in a second language situation cannot possibly cover these areas extensively within the timelines of classroom activities, hence the need for independent studies - reading, vocabulary development and improvement of language skills- on the part of students, and this is where the dictionary serves as a reliable learning resource.

Mclaughlin (1978) opines that 'Vocabulary development is the prime task of learners... This is why desperate learners carry dictionaries, not grammars, when they travel in foreign countries. Learners do not merely need to acquire basic words but also need to know the syntactic relationship and collocations of words and this is possible with the use of the dictionary.'

Folse (2014) views vocabulary as single words, sets of phrases, variable phrases, phrasal verbs and idioms. However, vocabulary comprises not just the meaning of words, but word collocations, spelling, pronunciation and other aspects of language usage.

According to Carter and McCarthy (1988), vocabulary is the most essential part of language proficiency; and as such, should be considered a vital area of teaching in the ESL situation.

Similarly, the teacher also needs dictionary skills to be able to guide students on dictionary use. Poole and Woods (2009:1) assert that 'Dictionaries present a very useful tool[sic] in the ESL classroom. However, teachers need to EXPLICITLY teach students, skills so that they can be utilised to[sic] maximum extent'. They further opine that teachers need to make sure that students have many opportunities (both independently and

collaboratively) to practice these dictionary skills, so that they can be refined. Teachers can do this by either using dictionaries to complement various content activities or by using dictionary –discovering activities’.

Having established the usefulness of the dictionary in language learning, this study intends to ascertain the effectiveness of the dictionary amongst students and teachers in an ESL environment, using first hand information and feedbacks from them.

1.2 The Concept of the Dictionary

Dictionaries, according to Landau (2001), have been concisely defined as ‘books that contain lists of words in alphabetical order with descriptions of their meanings’. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines the dictionary as ‘a book that gives a list of words of a language in alphabetical order and explains what they mean, or gives a word for them in a foreign language.’ Atkins and Rundell (2008) in a more detailed manner, define the dictionary as ‘a collection of words in one or more specific languages, often listed alphabetically ...with usage of information, definitions, etymologies, phonetics, pronunciations, translation and other information. It is a lexicographical product designed for utility and function, curated with selected data, presented in a way that shows inter-relationship amongst data.’

The oldest known dictionaries were attributed to Modern Syria (Ebla) in form of cuneiform tablets, about 2300 BC. From this discovery, many other dictionaries developed, such as the Spanish, Greek, French, English, Arabic and Indian dictionaries. The first recognised English alphabetical dictionary was written by Robert Cawdrey in 1604 (Skinner, 2013). After Cawdrey’s publication, not much attention was given to this enterprise which prompted Skinner’s remark that ‘it is a sort of disgrace to our nation that hitherto, we have had no ... standard of our language, our dictionaries at present being more properly what our neighbours the Dutch and the German call theirs, word-books, than dictionaries in the superior sense of that title’.

After several contributions from scholars like Elisha Coles, Thomas Blount and Phillip Edward; Samuel Johnson in 1755, produced a reliable and widely accepted dictionary –Samuel Johnson’s dictionary of the English language. Johnson’s work was adjudged the first modern dictionary. Other notable dictionaries were published much later, such as the American dictionary of Webster published in 1825. (Neilsen, 2008)

There are many types of dictionary namely: the monolingual dictionary- intended for first language users which defines words in that language; the bilingual dictionary for second language users, written in both first and second languages of the user, with translations from either language to the other; learner dictionary for foreign language learners; picture dictionary with pictorial aids; electronic dictionary; online dictionary; pocket dictionary and others.

According to Wolter (2015:5), ‘Students have several options of dictionary [sic] to choose from – paper -based, online resources and electronic ones. Traditionally, paper book dictionaries have been a common feature of the ESL classroom. These include picture, monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. For learners with lower language proficiency, picture dictionaries give essential vocabulary in word form, along with illustrations; instead of definitions’.

Similarly, Takahashi (2017) opines that ‘different types of dictionaries have helped language learners find the meaning of unknown words, guided them to form accurate sentences, and provide[sic] them with tips on word usage in the appropriate context’.

According to Aleeva & Safiullina (2016), ‘Working with traditional printed form dictionary requires concentration and logical thinking. Translation made with the help of a printed bilingual dictionary is neither downloaded, nor copied; it is a product of intellectual labor of the author. Therefore, for secondary school students, it is recommended to use a paper dictionary’.

However, Al -Jarf (1999) and Tang (1997) observe that in recent times, ESL learners use more of electronic dictionaries than paper dictionaries. Nurmukhamedov (2012) identifies six common online dictionaries for ESL learners as follows: the Cambridge Learner’s Dictionary, Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Macmillan Dictionary, Merriam –Webster Learner’s Dictionary and the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary.

The functions of these dictionaries are essentially to define meaning of words, etymology of words, pronunciation, spelling, show syllabication, abbreviations, translations and usage, amongst others.

Landau (2001:29) specifically describes the essence of the dictionary for second language learners in these words: ESL dictionaries contain many of the features of foreign-language instructions such as providing detailed

information on pronunciation, verb patterns, and collocations with some characteristics of children's dictionaries-definitions are expressed in simplified language and sometimes in a controlled vocabulary'.

Boulton & Cook (2017) further remark that 'Dictionaries are amongst the most widely-used tools for foreign and second language (L2) learning and can help with both frequent and infrequent items'.

The dictionary is therefore an essential learning resource for second language learners, both within and outside the class. Teachers also need dictionary skills for effective teaching in the English language.

1.3 Use of Dictionary in Teaching and learning of English in Nigeria

Teaching English as a second language in a developing country as Nigeria, is more challenging than in other developed countries of the world where the educational systems support teaching dictionary-skills in language acquisition, making it possible for students to inculcate word meaning based on their background knowledge from their first language with the use of bilingual dictionaries. The traditional chalking and telling in classroom instructions is still in practice in Nigeria, though teachers are gradually utilising various innovative learning techniques and ICT -support resources to update pedagogic activities amongst students, in line with best global practices. However, the educational system is grappling to adapt with scientific innovations, obtainable in developed countries where the educational policies are closely tailored to the needs of the students, as against the back drop of what the economy can afford. Hamilton (2012) makes the following observation:

'Given that students' success in school and beyond depends in great measure upon their ability to read with comprehension, there is an urgency to providing instruction[sic] that equip students with the skills and strategies necessary for lifelong vocabulary development.'

In recent times, a significant number of educational administrators, especially in private -owned secondary schools in Nigeria; are gradually implementing dictionary -based language instructions, to enable students improve extensively on their communicative abilities, not just in vocabulary development but in attaining proficiency in translations, reading and writing. This is in line with the observations of Gains and Redman (2005) that 'A learner who makes good use of a dictionary will be able to continue outside the classroom, and this will give him considerable autonomy about the decisions he makes about his own learning'.

Similarly, Leaney (2007:1) opines that 'there is tremendous amount of information in a good learner's dictionary-sometimes an overwhelming amount. Helping students tap into that information efficiently is one of the best ways to help them become independent lifelong language learners'.

Dictionaries are valuable learning tools for second language learners because they not only help them in enriching their vocabulary repertoire, but also in achieving comprehension and independence in the learning process.

1.4 Aim of the Study

The study aims at establishing the primacy of dictionary-based language instructions and learning, amongst second language learners of English Language in Nigeria.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This research is geared towards sensitizing policy makers, educational administrators, teachers, students and other stakeholders; of the multiple gains of implementing dictionary-based language instructions in the English language, which is globally recognised and serves as the official language and language of mobility in Nigeria and other countries of the world.

It will also serve as the spring board for teachers to swing into action, in the use of dictionary-based instructions, knowing its usefulness in language teaching; instead of waiting for its inclusion in the educational policy.

Students will appreciate the gains of dictionary -based language learning, and will be motivated to practise it in their private studies and as well, encourage their teachers to use dictionaries in classroom instructions.

2. Literature Review

The use of the dictionary as a learning resource for language learners in solving the problem of vocabulary acquisition and other related language tasks, have triggered off a lot of controversies and research. While most scholars agree to the use of the dictionary in learning and language- based instructions (Wolter, 2015; Landau, 2001; Bilash, Gregoret, & Lowen, 1999; Nation, 2001; Poole and Woods, 2009); other scholars have their reservations on the use of dictionaries in language teaching and learning.

Bilash, William, Gregory and Lowen (1999:4) opine that 'Dictionaries are the instruments of lifelong learning, it is to them that we turn to revive our second language skills and to enhance our native vocabulary'.

Wolter (2015) notes the reservations of some scholars who prefer that students use guessing strategy than the dictionary as a learning resource, while acknowledging the usefulness of the dictionary in these words: ‘...while guessing from context and other strategies can be effective, dictionary use can be a useful way to comprehend texts and learn more information about unknown words’. The dictionary is known to have provided students with, not just the meaning of words or phrases, but the possible meanings of a word in different contexts, correct pronunciations and spelling of words as well other resourceful information that can facilitate the learning of such language skills like reading and writing in the target language’. More importantly, ESL students use bilingual dictionaries to achieve the translation of words from the L1 to the L2, giving them the opportunity to build on their existing knowledge in their first language and link the association between languages in the learning process. This is hardly attainable, using the guess strategy as a learning aid in the ESL class. According to Nation (2001), word knowledge includes knowing all the possible meanings of a word, as well as the word’s connotations, spelling, pronunciation, parts of speech, frequency, usage and collocations which the dictionary provides in the learning process. The dictionary is therefore a better learning aid, since it addresses the multifarious tasks that the language learner has to grapple with. Similarly, Poole and Woods (2009:3) stress the role of the dictionary in language learning thus:

‘The long term goal of dictionary use and instruction is to make the student, independent of teachers and dictionaries. When the student is engaged in fluency work (i.e [sic] conversation or reading), continuous use of a dictionary will interrupt the natural flow of communication. Thus, the dictionary should be used only as a resource to support learning; not a learning tool in itself.’

A few scholars do not see much potentials in the use of the dictionary as a learning resource for students, unlike the guessing strategy which they propose to be time-saving and less distracting.

For example, Politzer and Mc Groarty (1985:7) opine that ‘looking up all the unknown words before attempting to read the text is a negative behaviour’. Carnine, Kameenui and Coyle (1984) state that unlike the use of the dictionary or glossary, a guessing strategy does not interrupt the reading process. Hosenfeld (1984) developed a set of techniques to train learners in making guesses and recommends the use of the dictionary as a last resort. Bilash, William, Gregoret and Loewen (1999:4), though advocates of the use of the dictionary, made known these reservations about the dictionary: ‘... the use of dictionary sometimes enable students to use which [sic] they do not yet fully comprehend; innumerable problems with polysemy, words with multiple extensions, and homonyms can arise from indiscriminate or uninformed use of dictionaries.’

The pertinent question amongst scholars in this area of interest, remains to what extent dictionaries can be used in language learning? especially in the ESL environment; since most scholars acknowledge the usefulness of the dictionary in language learning, though some believe that dictionary- based learning, has its demerits that could negate the whole educational objectives.

Bilash et al. (1999:4) seem to resolve this puzzle in these words: ‘Dictionaries should be used with regulation, as the use of dictionaries can encourage students to function at a word level rather than using content to decipher meaning, thus further hampering communicative and learning fluency.’

However, this submission does not undermine the usefulness of the dictionary because it serves as an incentive for students to master language learning tasks and achieve communicative competence in the learning of a second language.

It is also worthy of note that most of the studies on the use of dictionaries are based on improving vocabulary, reading and writing skills. Not much attention has been paid to its use in classroom -based language instructions. This is the gap that this work intends to fill, in addition to studying the individual use of the dictionary amongst language learners, to gain mastery, independence and confidence in the acquisition of English as a second language.

3. Area Description

This study was conducted in the urban area of Enugu, Nigeria; amongst secondary students and teachers in both public and private schools; though the number of private schools out-numbered those of the public schools who have not gained stability in the use of the dictionary as a teaching and learning aid. The research sample which was randomly selected, provided the background for the promotion of dictionary- based language instructions in the metropolis and in the entire country.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a quantitative survey, using well-designed and relevant questionnaires as well as personal interviews, to capture the learning situations in the selected schools, with respect to the use of dictionaries in

language teaching and learning of English as a second language in Nigeria. The sampling accommodated both the private and public schools in Enugu metropolis, using random selection criteria to ensure uniformity in the method of instruction for future planning and implementation.

4.1 Presentation of Tasks

Two sets of questionnaires were designed and administered to students and teachers respectively, on the use and effectiveness of the dictionary, both in their classroom activities and private studies. The questionnaires elicited the desired responses from a hundred respondents from each group, including information that were gathered from personal interviews, in the course of the study.

The students' questionnaire tested the knowledge of students in the use of dictionaries as well as feedbacks, regarding the effectiveness; both in their class activities in school and at home.

The teachers' questionnaires tested adequate training of students in the use of the dictionary as a learning resource and also ascertained ways of inculcating and testing dictionary skills amongst students in classroom instructions. These sets of questionnaires addressed the concerns of this study in line with its aim.

5. Dictionary as an Effective Strategy in Teaching and Learning English Language

The dictionary is an effective learning resource especially in an ESL environment. According to Folse (2004), studies of learners strategies which include dictionaries and students' needs, increased in mid 1990. Folse views learners' strategies as the specific actions used by students in learning language.

Oxford (2003:8) defined learning strategies as 'the specific behaviours or thought processes that students use to enhance their own L2 learning'.

Strategies or resources can also be explored by the teacher, for effective language delivery. Some of these resources including: using vocabulary cards, inferring meaning from context, translations from the learner's native language, using word parts to learn new words and looking up words in the dictionary.

Some of the roles of the teacher in the use of the dictionary are as follows:

- i. Sensitizing students on the use of the dictionary within and outside the ESL classroom.
- ii. Leading them from their cultural knowledge of the L1 to learning the rudiments of the L2, and assisting them to build on their existing knowledge of their first language and link relationships between languages.
- iii. Creating avenues for independent and collaborative learning by introducing language class activities that are dictionary-based.
- iv. Evaluating their dictionary skills from time to time, using questions that elicits demonstrative answers.
- v. Making dictionary learning, a fun-filled and easy exercise to motivate students and achieve success.

The learner's roles in the use of the dictionary include the following:

- i. The ESL learner must strive to achieve a level of language proficiency in the first language, in order to successfully transit to the target language.
- ii. Deciphering the meaning of words from their contexts, before consulting the dictionary. The dictionary should be seen as a resource rather than a tool for learning.
- iii. Engaging in private and collaborative activities, using the dictionary and asking questions when necessary.
- iv. Keeping a vocabulary book, noting meaning of words - their homophones, polysemes and other usages; and their collocations.
- v. Frequent practice with the dictionary, taking note of word spellings, pronunciation, parts of speech, abbreviations and others.
- vi. Ensuring the use of the right dictionary for learning tasks.
- vii. Applying dictionary skills in reading and writing and in vocabulary development for effective communication.
- viii. Using trendy dictionaries alongside book dictionaries, like the type- in and pop -up online dictionaries that are more convenient and time-saving.

6. Results

6.1 Results on Questionnaires for Teachers

Questions	Variables	Percentage
1. Do you own a dictionary?	Yes	90%
	No	10%
2. What type(s)	Book dictionary	90%
	Online dictionary	60%
3. Do you use the dictionary in preparing your English lessons?	Yes	75%
	No	25%
4. Do you use it in teaching students in the ESL class?	Yes	70%
	No	30%
5. How do you use it?	In content activities	60%
	Discovering new words	70%
	In teaching comprehension	70%
	Group learning activities	50%
	Forming vocabulary cards	70%
	Others	40%
6. What are your student's attitude to the use of dictionaries?	Poor	10%
	Good	35%
	Very receptive	55%
7. Do you think that the use of the dictionary assists students in the learning of English language?	Yes	98%
	No	2%
8. In what areas?	Vocabulary development	90%
	Pronunciation	60%
	Spelling	98%
	Collocations	70%
	Other usage	50%
9. Rate the extent of its effectiveness?	Very High	60%
	High	30%
	Average	8%
	Low	0%
	Very low	0%

The above result showed a high acceptance of the dictionary as a learning resource, with a significant acceptance ratio of 90:10 percent in the rating of its effectiveness in the teaching of English as a second language.

6.2 Results on Students' Questionnaires

Questions	Variables	Percentage
1. Do you own a dictionary?	Yes	75%
	No	25%
2. What type?	Book dictionary	75%
	Online, using smart phones	50%
	Electronic dictionaries	30%
3. Specify the type(s) you use -	Monolingual dictionary	10%
	Bilingual dictionary	75%
	Pictorial dictionary	30%
	Online, using smart phones	50%
	Electronic dictionary	30%
4. Who trained you to use a dictionary?	Teacher	60%
	Parents	30%
	Colleague(s)	30%
	Self	75%
5. Do you think you have enough training, using the dictionary?	Yes	48%
	No	52%
6. Do you use dictionary in class during English language lessons?	Yes	75%
	No	25%
7. In doing what?	Looking up words	75%
	Dictionary- based exercises	70%
	Team exercises	75%
	Other language tasks	60%
8. Do you use the dictionary at home or during private studies?	Yes	85%
	No	15%
9. Has the dictionary been beneficial to you in the learning of the English language?	Yes	95%
	No	5%
10. In what areas of English?	Vocabulary development	95%
	Spellings and pronunciation	95%
	Parts of speech	75%
	Elements of grammar	60%
	Others	40%
11. Can you rate the extent of the usefulness of the dictionary in your learning of the English language?	Very high	65%
	High	10%
	Average	15%
	Low	5%
	Very low	0%

From the above result, a very encouraging feedback was recorded from students on the use of the dictionary, attesting to the effectiveness of the dictionary as a learning resource amongst ESL learners.

7. Discussion of Findings

Feedbacks from teachers' questionnaires, showed a very high acceptance of the dictionary as an effective teaching resource in the ESL classroom. Although, not all the teachers used dictionaries in their pedagogic

activities, a significant number (70%), applied dictionary skills in teaching English to second language learners in their various schools. Interestingly, teachers who do not utilize dictionaries while teaching, conceded to the indispensability of the dictionary in learning English as a second language, resulting to a high percentage of teachers (90%), rating the dictionary as a very effective language resource in the ESL situation.

Results from learners' questionnaires showed a significant basic knowledge of the use of the dictionary, although a good number of students (52%) support additional training on the dictionary by teachers, as opposed to 48% who think they have adequate training in the use of the dictionary. Similarly, majority of students use the dictionary for private studies, especially in the areas of vocabulary development, spelling, pronunciation and other language tasks. The result also showed a competitive ratio of (70:50) in the use of book dictionaries (mostly bilingual) and online dictionaries respectively.

Ultimately, 95% of the students acknowledged the efficiency of the dictionary as a learning resource in learning English as a second language, as against 5% who thought otherwise.

8. Conclusion

The complementary role of the dictionary in language learning cannot be over emphasized. In the ESL situation, the need for the dictionary is more compelling, because students need to gain proficiency in their first language (L1) to facilitate the learning of the target language (L2). ESL students have multi- language activities to engage in, (such as the definition of words, deciphering content meanings, learning fluency, developing vocabulary cards, editing writing activities and a host of others) and the teacher cannot cope with all of these, within the classroom environment, hence the need for students to use dictionaries to complement classroom instructions. In recent times, scientific technologies have introduced sophisticated means of using the dictionary, aside using traditional book dictionaries. Online dictionaries such as the 'type-in' or 'pop-up' types are presently in use, to facilitate learners' efforts in language learning; making it an easier exercise for students. In line with the observations of Pooles and Woods (2009), dictionary learning and training needs to be fun and motivating –so that students will enjoy using them, become comfortable with them as a learning resource and experience success.

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