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DESIGNING FOR EFFECTIVE LEARNING

DICTIONARIES WITHOUT BORDERS: EXPANDING THE LIMITS OF THE ACADEMY

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Abstract

Many people imagine dictionaries to be bulky tomes that are hard to lift and are only useful for quick translations or to check the meaning or spelling of difficult words. This paper aims to dispel that myth and show how online versions of monolingual English learners' dictionaries (MELDs) can be used pedagogically to engage students in academic writing and speaking conventions at Australian universities, thus expanding the borders of academe. It is not necessary to be an expert in lexicography in order to point students in the direction of these resources, which are freely available online. All that lecturers need is a basic knowledge of the uses of a MELD, and a willingness to share these insights with their students. Once students have acquired skills in dictionary use, they are equipped with a tool to engage them throughout their degrees and beyond into the workplace. This paper will present important features from five online MELDs and outline their information on spelling, pronunciation, grammar, meanings, synonyms, style and idioms in order to improve EAL speakers' academic writing and widen the borders of the academy.

Keywords

online, dictionary, English, lecturer, student, academy

Introduction

European readers of a certain age may remember the television program *Jeux sans frontières* (Games without borders, also known as *It's a Knockout*), in which contestants from different European countries, dressed in outlandish costumes, performed a series of increasingly silly, knockabout tasks to compete for a prize. The expression has been extended to more worthy causes, such as Médecins sans Frontières (Doctors without borders) and Engineers without borders. All these titles can be extended to the exciting new field of online lexicography, that is, Dictionaries without borders.

Dictionaries, often regarded as weighty books of last resort when doing crossword puzzles or engaging in arguments over spelling or pronunciation, are truly artefacts that have not only cultural but also pedagogical implications and uses. Dictionaries empower speakers of lesser-known languages, giving their languages greater prestige because they are considered worthy of being included and analysed in their own book (Klein, 2010). They also empower speakers of English as an Additional Language (EAL, which embraces both ESL and EFL) by providing not only guidance on spelling and pronunciation, but also information about grammar, meanings, synonyms, style, and idiomatic expressions, through definitions and example sentences. With this information, international and students from a non-English speaking background can enter more freely into the world of academic writing. Such information is available in many different locations, such as: English language resource websites, for example, Dave's ESL café (see http://www.eslcafe.com); blogs with question and answer sections, for example, The Grammar Gang (see http://thegrammargang.blogspot.com.au) and textbooks, for example, *English Grammar in Use* (Murphy, 2004) and *Writing Academic English* (Oshima & Hogue, 2006). Dictionaries, however, provide perhaps the most comprehensive source in which succinct information on all these areas can be found in one location. Moreover, dictionary users are no longer restricted to paper versions in their choice of products but now have access to online versions of most popular dictionaries, broadening the limits of research capabilities.

There are many types of dictionary available to learners of English. The three major types are: (i) monolingual (purely in English), (ii) bilingual (in English and in the speaker's first language), and (iii) bilingualised (which translates from the speaker's first language but gives definitions in English). Monolingual dictionaries may be further divided into those written for native speakers of English and those written for non-native speakers or learners. Most, if not all, major dictionaries are now available on CD-ROM and online, as well as through mobile phone and iPad applications. Some of these resources are freely available, but others require a subscription. Care must also be taken when choosing a free online dictionary as some are based on outdated versions of existing dictionaries (Ogilvie, 2011).

With growing numbers of international students at Australian universities, constituting over a fifth of the student population in 2004 (Myers & Picard, 2007), there is clearly an increasing need to find resources which will easily and cheaply assist them in their transition to their new academic environment and widen the borders of their learning institution so that they are not restricted to working in a library in order to consult a reliable dictionary. Online learners' dictionaries are increasingly being redesigned for this very purpose. It is those dictionaries designed for advanced learners - and in particular the online versions of these dictionaries - which will be the subject of this paper as it addresses the pedagogical implications of online dictionaries to enhance the learning experience of all students, both inside and outside the physical space of a university.

Background to learners' dictionaries

Learners' dictionaries exist in many languages but English was the first to develop the field of pedagogical lexicography prompted by the "vocabulary control movement" which aimed to identify words of particular importance for foreign learners (Cowie, 2001). The first dictionary available for learners of English was *Hornby's Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* published in 1942 (Cowie, 2001). This later became the first edition of the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Since then, the market has developed and expanded and there are now five major British advanced learners' dictionaries all of which come with a CD-ROM and are available free of charge online:

- *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (CALD)* (Cambridge University Press, 2010);

- *Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary* (COBUILD) (Collins, 2010);
- *Longman Dictionary Of Contemporary English* (LDOCE) (Pearson Education, 2010);
- *Macmillan English Dictionary For Advanced Learners* (MEDAL) (Macmillan, 2010); and,
- *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD) (Oxford University Press, 2010).

These dictionaries are known collectively as the "Big Five" (Bogaards 2010, p. 9). There is also a paper and online American learners' dictionary, *Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary* (Merriam-Webster, 2010). Unfortunately, there is no longer an Australian dictionary for advanced learners since the Macquarie learners' dictionary of 1999 is now out of print. These British and American dictionaries (henceforth referred to as *Monolingual English Learners' Dictionaries*, or MELDs) are excellent, but inevitably lack Australian content. For example, Australian pronunciation is not given and many Australian words are not included. Euro, for instance, is defined only as a European monetary unit and no reference is made to the kangaroo. A survey of 55 language teachers by Miller (2008) also revealed that several Australian teachers felt that there was still a need for an Australian MELD. Until such time as a new dictionary is created for the Australian market, however, the non-native speaker is restricted to the use of dictionaries designed for users in other countries. In this paper, coverage will be given to online versions of the British Big Five dictionaries, since they may be closer to Australian English than the US-based Merriam-Webster's advanced learner's English dictionary. This is evidenced by eight out of ten examples of variable spelling cited in the Australian Style manual (Commonwealth of Australia, 2002) favours British over American English spelling. All online versions were consulted on January 19, 2012. They are freely available and require no special software in order to use them on a computer with Internet access.

Many students and teachers are not fully aware of the potential uses of learners' dictionaries (Atkins & Varantola, 1998; Chi, 2003), and often restrict their use to the decoding, or understanding, of written material, failing to realise the wealth of resources available in the dictionary (Béjoint & Moulin, 1985). In a survey of 42 international students in Australia, it was found that very few knew what information could be found in a MELD or how it could be applied to their academic writing (Miller, 2006). Teachers too often did not know that grammatical details, or information about collocations and idioms, were available in a MELD (Miller, 2008). According to Kirkness (2004), however, the MELD "represents for teachers and learners alike perhaps the single most valuable source of linguistic information on all aspects of the target language" (p. 78). This information is now freely available in online dictionaries that are less restricted than paper dictionaries in terms of space and can thus offer a more comprehensive and easily accessible resource. The following indicates ways in which Internet versions of MELDs can assist EAL students to improve their academic writing thus engaging them more fully in the wider world of academic study.

Uses of learners' dictionaries

Since MELDs are written entirely in English, EAL students are exposed to a resource that extends their knowledge and use of the target language and sets them thinking in the lexical and syntactic patterns appropriate for academic study in an English-speaking environment. MELDs can be used by EAL students to help them to engage more fully with their academic studies in terms of spelling, pronunciation, grammar, definitions, style and idioms. Online MELDs do this more fully than paper dictionaries, because they allow the user to move more quickly to cross-references via hyperlinks and provide many new user-friendly features.

Spelling

One of the major advantages of an online MELD, compared to a paper version, is that users who are unsure of their spelling can type in a word and be given a list of suggestions. For example, *CALD Online* (see http://dictionary.cambridge.org/) gives the following prompt when confronted by a misspelt word:

"XXX was not found. Did you spell it correctly? Here are some alternatives: . . ." Spelling variants are also given, so that users can consider US or UK variations.

On typing in "misspelt," for instance, the following information appears in *CALD online*:

> *misspell*
> verb /ˌmɪsˈspel/ v [T] (misspelled or UK misspelt, misspelled or UK misspelt) UK
>
> Definition: to fail to spell a word correctly
> *misspelling noun* /ˌmɪsˈspel.ɪŋ/ n [C or U]
>
> *This essay is full of misspellings.*

(Definition of misspell verb from the Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus © Cambridge University Press)

From this we can see that the user does not need to know the headword (usually the infinitive) as they would in a conventional paper dictionary. Instead, they can type in any part of speech and be linked to the appropriate entry. Even a careless misspelling, such as *internart* instead of *internet*, yielded the following suggestions: *interfaith, intermarry, internist, interact, internal, interacts, internally, internet, internists, internalise.* It does not take long to scan the list and find the most appropriate word. The online dictionary also explains that *internet* can be written with or without the initial capital letter. Such comprehensive information can help to extend the user's vocabulary.

Pronunciation

Online dictionaries have the advantage of supplying spoken pronunciation, as well as conventional transcription using the International Phonetic Association alphabet symbols. One has only to click on the appropriate icon to hear the word in either British or US spoken English. No special software is necessary in order to do this.

Grammar

With conventional paper dictionaries, users' occasionally poor knowledge of grammar can make it hard to find a word, since they do not know if a word is a noun, verb or adjective (Nesi & Haill, 2002). With online dictionaries, this is not a problem. Any part of speech can be typed in and the dictionary will make appropriate suggestions. For the word *found* entered into *MEDAL online* (see http://www.macmillandictionary.com), for example, the following search results are given:

- **found** verb
- **found**
- **lost-and-found** noun
- **new-found** adjective
- **find** verb
- **find out** phrasal verb
- **be found**
- **nowhere to be seen/in sight/to be found**

Users thus have a choice between verbs, past participles, adjectives and nouns. The *COBUILD online* dictionary (see http://www.mycobuild.com/free-search.aspx) gives only two choices, but explains them clearly and expands the information when the 'more' link is clicked:

- **found** / faʊnd /

  Found is the past tense and past participle of *find*. **More**

- **find** / faɪnd /

  VERB If you **find** someone or something, you see them or learn where they are. **More**

In this way, users can find words without initially knowing the correct part of speech.

Although it might be argued that learners can refer to grammar books for specialised information about word use, many students prefer to find a quick answer in a single location. An online dictionary is ideal for this, since it provides examples and suggestions about word form and use. This is particularly important in the case of such things as the countability of nouns and the use of prepositions. Nouns in English may be countable or uncountable. If they are countable, they can be made plural and they can take the indefinite article "*a"* or may need the definite article "*the*." Since "*the"* is the most frequent word in the English language and "*a"* is the fifth most common (Sinclair, cited in Master, 2002), knowledge of countability is vital for language learners. Prepositions too raise many problems for non-native speakers (Lindstromberg, 1998), and this information is particularly useful in a MELD. For example, does one *write with, in* or *at* a pen? *OALD Online* (see http://www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com) gives these examples:

- **write in/on/with something**

  *Please write **in** pen **on** both sides of the paper.*

  *I haven't got anything to write **with**.*

- **write something about/on something**

  *He hopes to write a book **about** his experiences one day.*

  *She had to write a report **on** the project.*

These conceptual prepositions (*write a report about/on*) are particularly difficult for non-native speakers to grasp, since the conceptual field may not coincide in their first language (Evans & Tyler, n.d.), or the system corresponding to that of prepositions in English, indicating a link between two objects, may be entirely different.

Other grammatical areas for which learners can find information in MELDs are indications of transitive/intransitive verbs (showing whether or not a verb takes an object); information about differences in word form according to tense (*found* is the past participle and past simple form of *find*); and irregular plural forms (as in *thesis/theses*). Again, the online dictionary can offer many links to other information in the dictionary and widen the user's search options.

Definitions, synonyms and example sentences

One of the classical uses of a dictionary is for defining the meaning of a word. MELDs provide

this information in a more complete way than traditional dictionaries, since they provide complete sentences rather than synonyms. Most lecturers will have seen examples of synonyms used incorrectly in students' work. This is epitomised in Foer's (2002) novel *Everything is Illuminated*, in which we read such wonderful sentences as, "I often go to the beach and roost for many hours so I do not have to disseminate currency" (p. 52).

MELDs help students to avoid such eccentricities by providing definitions that place words in context. This is particularly true of online MELDs, which have greater space to explore a word's meaning, and are frequently linked to a publisher's own thesaurus. In *CALD online*, for example, the definition of *currency* is "the money that is used in a particular country at a particular time." *COBUILD* uses a sentence style of definition, and defines *disseminate* thus: "To **disseminate** information or knowledge means to distribute it so that it reaches many people or organizations." In the case of *roost*, *MEDAL Online* tells us that "when birds or bats roost, they go somewhere to rest or sleep." The context is thus provided with the meaning, so that Foer's hero would have spent his time on the beach prosaically sleeping, resting or sitting, but not roosting. All the "Big Five" provide synonyms for their entries and each has example sentences. For example, for *thesis* in *MEDAL online* there are nine suggestions for other words connected with a formal piece of writing, each with its own definition and examples, which incorporate links to further definitions:

- **dissertation (**noun)
  long piece of writing on a particular subject that you do as part of a university degree
- **essay** (noun)
  a short piece of writing on a particular subject that is published in a book, magazine, or newspaper
- **monograph** (noun)
  a formal piece of writing, or a short book on a particular subject
- **meditation (**noun)
  a piece of writing that expresses serious thoughts on a particular subject
- **paper (**noun)
  a piece of writing or a talk on an academic subject
- **treatise (**noun)
  a serious book or piece of writing about a particular subject
- **discussion (**noun)
  a piece of writing about an important or serious subject
- **critique (**noun)
  a careful written examination of a subject that includes the writer's opinions
- **text (**noun)
  a piece of writing such as a book or play that you study for an examination or for research

Such examples help writers new to academic genres to choose the most appropriate word for their assignments, instead of relying on synonyms through the thesaurus in the Microsoft Office suite. The possibilities are limited only by the search time at the user's disposal.

Style

Another feature of MELDs is their information on style, or register. It is possible to see not only the context of the word but the degree of formality or informality that applies to it and whether it is a slang expression, archaic or offensive. There is a dictionary named *Dangerous English 2000!* (Claire, 1998) designed specifically so that students can check whether their language is acceptable in polite society. If language learners do not possess this dictionary, which does not appear to be freely available online, then they can check in a MELD whether a word they have heard or want to use is taboo. They can also check that the style they are using is appropriate. For example, for the entry for *seek* in *CALD online* the word is described as "formal," while *guy* is given an informal label. *Omnibus*, in its meaning of "transport," has the label "old use", while *bird* meaning "a particular type of person", as in "a rare bird" is labelled "old fashioned" and *bird* meaning "a young woman" is labelled "slang." Such information is invaluable for students

approaching their first essays and unsure of the style of vocabulary to use. Hyperlinks quicken the search process.

Idioms

Another major use of MELDs, and one which is often overlooked, is their inclusion of idiomatic phrases and expressions. While these idioms are often British in reference and origin, many are still used in Australia. Some Australian idioms are also included (Miller, 2010). It is often impossible for an EAL student to know whether a word belongs to an idiom and so they will look first in a MELD rather than in an idiom dictionary. By this means, they can check information given by lecturers, as well as gaining greater understanding of written texts. For example, in a transcript in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (2010) we find the sentence, "this is the reactor that cried wolf." The student unsure of the meaning of this idiom will find an explanation in all the Big Five. This is another major help in extending the borders of their additional language and new academic culture.

Implications for the academy

It is not necessary for content lecturers to be experts in lexicography in order to promote the use of online dictionaries to their students. Simple links on websites, and reminders to students that such resources are available free of charge, are helpful ways to make students aware of the possibilities of MELDs, and to help them feel that their lecturers wish them to be thoroughly engaged in the learning experience, not only in terms of content but also in terms of approaching their new academic discipline. Since content lecturers may not have time to become thoroughly versed in all the options available through a MELD it is recommended that a lecture on their use be included in any pre-enrolment English programs run by universities and other tertiary education institutions. Learning advisors can also become more familiar with the uses of a MELD, and then spend more time with students on an individual basis, to help them develop their dictionary use. Online courses in particular could benefit by including a workshop on MELDs, with links to appropriate websites.

The skills learned during study are transferrable to later stages of students' academic careers, and indeed, beyond the university and into their work lives. They will thus be well prepared to engage with English as a world language in its many forms, and know where to seek for information which will help them express their ideas in the manner of a native speaker, so that they are no longer confined to the borders of an academy but are equipped for life after study.

Conclusion

It is clear that there are many uses for online MELDs in enhancing students' academic and other writing. Such dictionaries assist students to write more fluently, accurately and idiomatically by providing word choices, synonyms and grammatical information. They are useful not only for written expression, but for helping students, particularly EAL speakers to engage more thoroughly with their new academic genres, to decode language encountered in lectures and readings, and to encode their own thoughts and ideas in assignments and oral presentations. Lecturers need not be experts themselves in dictionary use. It is enough for them to know where to find resources to recommend to their students. By using online MELDs to transcend the limits of the physical university space, the borders of the academy are extended and students have a tool which they can use throughout their university careers, enabling them to engage not just with academic study but with a lifetime of English use.

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