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Online English-English Learner Dictionaries Boost Word Learning

*"Vocabulary is one of those things where
the rich get richer."*

—Dr. Eli Hinkel (Editorial Board 2009)

Learners of English might be familiar with several online monolingual dictionaries that are not necessarily the best choices for the English as Second/Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) context. In my experience while teaching ESL at an intensive English program in the United States, learners of English often consult sources like *Dictionary.com* (www.dictionary.com) and *Merriam-Webster* (www.merriam-webster.com). Although these monolingual online dictionaries contain definitions, pronunciation guides, and other elements normally found in general-use dictionaries, they are compiled with native or near-native speakers of English in mind, not for learners of English. English learners tend to gravitate to these dictionaries because they are seemingly unaware of other dictionaries that are specifically designed for them.

Research on dictionary use in second language teaching indicates learners of English gain much when they become familiar with dictionary features (Nesi and Haill 2002; Rizo-Rodríguez 2004). For this reason, ESL/EFL teachers should learn about and introduce the several excellent online dictionaries with features especially designed for learners of English. These online dictionaries promote strategic and effective word learning, but it is critical for learners to be trained by teachers who are familiar with proper dictionary use so that the online dictionaries are used to maximum benefit in the classroom. The best online learner dictionaries include (1) a corpus-based compilation of words; (2) word frequency data; (3) collocation guides; (4) authentic examples of how words are used; and (5) topical vocabulary from different disciplines. This article will help teachers become aware of these important features and also provide suggestions on how to integrate dictionary-related exercises into their ESL/EFL lesson plans.

Learner dictionaries

Learner dictionaries designed for ESL/EFL students offer information on a word's different meanings, the ways that certain words are used together, example sentences, explanatory notes, and many other features that are included with the learner in mind. Due to advances in technology, learner dictionaries come in many forms: hard-copy books, CD-ROM, online, and even in applications for smartphones, tablet computers, and other mobile devices. Most of the recent English-English learner dictionaries, particularly those published after 2005, come with a hard copy and a CD-ROM. The CD-ROM offers useful features not found in the hard copy, which include:

- pronunciation guides (usually for both British and American language varieties)
- electronic writing tools (designed to improve learners' writing)
- quick find (clicking on a word in a text gives its definition)
- picture dictionaries (mostly in color)
- extra grammar and vocabulary exercises (to enhance learning)
- vocabulary notes (an electronic version of a vocabulary diary)
- wildcard functions (looking up words without knowing their exact spelling)

It is important to point out that all of these features are designed to help students learn new words strategically and enjoyably (see Rizo-Rodríguez [2008] for more information about CD-ROM dictionaries). When these features become the focus, they help learners with efficient dictionary use and effective vocabulary learning (McCarthy and O'Dell 2005).

The six online English-English learner dictionaries in Table 1, freely available on the Internet, share many of the features of CD-ROM dictionaries. They provide learners with information about word meanings and word frequency, easy-to-read definitions, word combination choices, and explanatory notes. However, even though these online dictionaries share similar features, some of the features differ in terms of information representation, usability, interface, and user friendliness. For this reason, a gentle learning curve faces students and teachers alike.

1. *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary* (CLD) http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/learner-english
2. *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD) http://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/british
3. *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (LDCE) www.ldoceonline.com
4. *Macmillan Dictionary* (MD) www.macmillandictionary.com
5. *Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary* (MWLD) www.learnersdictionary.com
6. *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD) www.oxfordadvancedlearnersdictionary.com

Table 1. Online English-English learner dictionaries

When teachers become familiar with the most useful elements of learner dictionaries, they can easily incorporate dictionary-based activities into their lesson plans. The following sections focus on five important features and provide suggestions on how teachers can enable students to recognize and use the features to help them learn English.

Dictionary feature 1: Corpus-based dictionaries

The dictionaries listed in Table 1 are *corpus-based*, which means the content is based on real-world spoken and written discourse when words, definitions, and examples are selected and organized. Church (2008) claims that corpus-based dictionaries "describe how language is actually used, as opposed to how it ought to be used" (334). Thus, definitions for a word are sequenced based on their frequency of use, and example sentences in corpus-based dictionaries are authentic. This sequencing makes it easy for learners of English to focus first on frequent words and meanings that will give them the most mileage. When both teachers and learners of English appreciate the influence of corpus-based research on learner dictionaries, they begin to see the distinct advantage of corpus-based learner dictionaries as opposed to non-corpus dictionaries.

Teacher application

It is important to raise both the teacher's and the learner's awareness about differences in the way that general-use dictionaries

and corpus-based dictionaries are compiled. Language teachers can provide learners with eye-opening activities to explain the distinctions between the two types of dictionaries (see Reppen 2010 for detailed activities). For example, teachers can pick two or three words that their students will profit from learning (e.g., *appointment, breakfast,* and *discriminate*). The words could come from a reading passage or a video that the students have just read or watched, or will be assigned to read or watch. The teacher writes these words on a blackboard or has the students write the words on a piece of paper, and asks them to check the definition from one general-use dictionary (e.g., dictionary.com or www.merriam-webster.com) and one online learner dictionary from Table 1 as a homework assignment. Teachers can do this activity in a classroom if there is access to the Internet. After the students finish the activity at home or in class, the teacher asks whether the information presented in the general-use and the learner dictionary is different or the same. Students state which type of dictionary contains more useful information about the words. When contrasting these two types of dictionaries, students are likely to observe that learner dictionaries recommend more level-appropriate useful tips about words than the general-use dictionaries. After this activity, the students might look for additional helpful elements in the learner dictionaries.

Dictionary feature 2: Word frequency

Knowing whether a word is used a lot (high frequency) or a little (low frequency) in overall written and spoken discourse is very helpful information to English learners; that makes corpus-based dictionaries a must for the ESL/EFL classroom. Because high-frequency words are important for language learners, several vocabulary researchers encourage language teachers to spend considerable time on them (Nation 2001; Schmitt 2000). According to Nation (2001, 17), the first 1,000 of 2,000 high-frequency words cover 84.3 percent of conversations, 75.6 percent of newspaper articles, and 73.5 percent of academic texts. This means that if a learner knows these 1,000 words, then he or she will recognize 75.6 percent of the words in newspaper articles and 73.5 percent of the

words in academic texts. It is important to note that the second 1,000 words on the list drop considerably in frequency, covering 6 percent of conversations, 4.7 percent of newspaper articles, and 4.6 percent of academic texts. Word-frequency issues merit a separate article, and interested readers can learn more about frequency lists at www.lextutor.ca/freq/lists_download (maintained by Tom Cobb).

Some online corpus-based dictionaries use special designations to indicate particular words that will be encountered a large number of times. For example, the OALD places a key-shaped icon next to high-frequency words. In addition to the first and second 1,000-word frequency lists, the OALD indicates the words that are commonly used in academic texts (Coxhead 2006). The MD uses a red font to identify more than 7,000 words that are most often used in oral and written communication and also places one star (lower frequency) to three stars (higher frequency) after each word to further distinguish levels of frequency use.

Reinforcing the importance of the high-frequency word lists makes English learning more efficient and strategic because learners know which words to learn first. Teachers can use the following activity to help the learners notice and acquire high- and low-frequency words.

Teacher application

Conscientious students often want to learn each and every word they encounter when they read a text, listen to a lecture, or talk to other people. These types of learners, often lower-proficiency or beginning-level students, attempt to learn all the words or expressions they encounter by making a huge list in their vocabulary notebooks. Unavoidably, these lists include both high- and low-frequency words and expressions. While we do not want to dissuade learners from being word collectors, we can help them become more strategic word learners. To do so, teachers can raise their students' awareness about word frequency and its importance in word learning. This also helps learners select dictionaries with the best word-frequency features. For example, as a classroom activity, the teacher asks students to make a list of new words that they have encountered while reading a text or participating in or listening to a dialogue. The students check the frequency of

the words from an online learner dictionary such as the MD or OALD and reorganize the list of words based on their frequency. After completing the task, students compare their findings with each other. After making the list of the new words, students are assigned different online dictionaries (both general-use and learner) to compare their results. Teachers can have the students learn the most frequent words first, and then learn the words that are not as frequent but still important for a designed unit or a lesson.

Dictionary feature 3: Collocations

With the use of corpora, lexicographers identify *collocations* (word combinations that normally go together) and incorporate them into learner dictionaries. The learner dictionaries listed in Table 1 indicate collocations in drop-down boxes and/or within the definitions of words. In contrast, most general-use dictionaries do not give collocation information (Zimmerman 2009). Second language vocabulary research shows that even those learners with higher proficiency levels often have problems with collocations (Laufer 2011). That is why many learners often say "do an appointment" instead of "make an appointment," or "strong rain" instead of "heavy rain." To avoid these types of mistakes, learners of English are encouraged to make an extra effort to learn collocations (McCarthy and O'Dell 2005). Thus, it is important to point out that learner dictionaries note the most frequently used word combinations by highlighting them in example sentences, bolding them under or within word entries, or listing them in special collocation boxes so they are easy to see. Teachers should remind learners repeatedly to keep an eye on collocations when they look up word entries (Lewis 2000). The following activities help students notice collocations in learner dictionaries.

Teacher application

To bring collocations to the conscious attention of students, the teacher asks students to look up two or three nouns (e.g., *appointment, pain,* and *language*) in one of the recommended learner dictionaries and find collocations for them. Because these words are all nouns, the students are asked to find adjectives or verbs that go with them (e.g.,

"make an appointment/a dentist appointment," "ease/relieve pain," "constant/sharp pain," "speak/acquire language," and "legal/technical language"). In the next class, the students share the collocations that they found with the whole class. The teacher writes the students' findings on the blackboard and discusses the meanings of the collocations as a whole group activity.

Teachers can also have students find collocation mistakes in short passages (written by the teacher or by students). Students are presented with a short passage such as the one below with six collocation mistakes (in bold here) and are asked to identify improper collocations and correct them.

> Yesterday I did not **make** my homework because I wanted to **get** fun with my friends. I called my friends and invited them over to my apartment. I wanted to **do** a special effort and decided to cook for everybody. Surprisingly, all the invited people came at the same time because John **put** a ride to everybody. We ate, **heard** some music, and **looked at** a movie. Everybody had fun.

The difficulty of the text and collocation mistakes will, of course, vary based on the students' level of proficiency. If the learners are less proficient, then they should be given an easier text, with the types of collocation errors that they are likely to make.

Dictionary feature 4: Authentic examples

For EFL learners another advantage of learner dictionaries over their general-use counterparts is the abundance of example sentences. In addition to definitions, learner dictionaries include "authentic examples to illustrate the use of words in context" (Coxhead and Byrd 2007, 138). The context provided in these example sentences serves as another useful tool for learning new words. One online learner dictionary, for example, provides definitions for the entry *discriminate* and uses sentences to explain how "discriminate between" is different from "discriminate against" (Zimmerman 2009). As second language vocabulary research indicates, in order to acquire a word in a second language, a learner needs to encounter that particular

word a number of times, preferably in various contexts (Nation 2001). There is no magic number of encounters (Schmitt 2000), but reading examples with the word in context in an online learner dictionary helps students fully acquire that word. The dictionaries listed in Table 1 have from two to 16 example sentences in their first entry meaning for the verb *see*. The first entry meaning for the word *appointment* contains from one to seven example sentences.

Teacher application

While general-use dictionaries provide learners with a few example sentences or phrases using the target word in a sentence, the corpus-based learner dictionaries often contain several example sentences and phrases for each target word. To help students realize this important distinction between general-use and learner dictionaries, teachers can divide the learners into groups. The students in each group choose one of the learner dictionaries in order to see the usage of a target word in example sentences. Later, the students share the example sentences they encountered with students in other groups. After this activity, the teacher encourages the students to produce sentences containing a word or phrase that they have learned and provides them with feedback on proper word/phrase usage or correct collocations. The important goals of the activity are to let students know that there are useful example sentences containing target words/phrases and to encourage students to notice how the target word is used in various contexts.

Dictionary feature 5: Topical vocabulary

Another useful element corpus-based learner dictionaries offer for vocabulary learning is the way they present topical vocabulary by indicating how the words relate semantically to different categories. For example, in the LDCE, students can see that the word *vocabulary* belongs to the two topical groups "Linguistics" and "Language." Other dictionaries provide synonyms and semantic webs to indicate different word usages and to illustrate how a single word relates to different concepts. By using the topical feature of these dictionaries, learners can find a specific word used in a general or specialized context.

Teacher application

The topical vocabulary dictionary feature is a particularly effective tool to activate learners' background knowledge. Before starting a new unit, the teacher directs the students to discover words or phrases relevant to the new topic. Depending on the nature of the main topic, the teacher gives learners a few key words (e.g., *psychology, college,* and *politics*) and asks them to explore the dictionaries by using the *Topic Areas* of CLD and CALD, the *Topic Dictionary* of LDCE, the *Thesaurus* of MD, or the *Usage Note* feature of OALD to create their own "anticipated" vocabulary list. The students are reminded that the list should contain words related to the main topic of the unit (e.g., in the CLD Education topic, words include *boarding school, prep school, high school,* and *co-ed*). This allows students to activate their prior knowledge regarding topical words or phrases. In addition, they will have an opportunity to interact with their teachers and learn the meaning of any new words they encounter.

Conclusion

Early vocabulary researchers (e.g., Nation 2001; Nesi 1999) predicted that CD-ROM and online dictionaries would be very useful for English learners. After less than a decade, innovations in lexicography and technology, creative work on corpus linguistics, and consistent second language vocabulary research have enabled learners of English to access these dictionaries via CD-ROM, online sites, and mobile communication devices. These technologies continue to be "a preferred alternative to the 'fat' dictionary in print" (Nesi 1999, 65). Because technology is advancing rapidly, particularly through innovations driven by the Internet, these online tools can be expected to be in constant flux. In fact, this swift progress has influenced this article. When I was doing research in November 2009, neither CLD nor CALD had audio features available, but, by the time I had submitted the article for review, they had added audio pronunciations of the words. Similarly, MD has recently incorporated a section called "Get It Right!" that offers suggestions to help learners avoid word-use mistakes and improve their lexical accuracy. Based on my experience, these online resources can be expected to periodically update, expand, and improve

their features for language learners. Therefore, dictionary users should watch for new features because these dictionaries do not always announce changes or additions.

Some teachers of English might often refer their students to general-use dictionaries that are designed for native speakers of English, not being informed that nowadays most learner dictionaries are learner-centered, corpus-based, and informed by second language research and pedagogy. This article presents several suggestions to language teachers in terms of what features the learner dictionaries offer and how these features can be introduced to help learners become "expert" dictionary users. The practical suggestions will hopefully add variety to the teachers' syllabi and raise learners' awareness about the features of online learner dictionaries that can make their word learning convenient, strategic, and learner-oriented.

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ANSWERS TO *THE LIGHTER SIDE* LISTEN UP!

Unscrambled idiom: "I'm all ears."

9. great (r)
8. height (i)
7. mow (m)
6. laid (l)
5. goose (s)
4. far (a)
3. beard (a)
2. soul (l)
1. bread (e)