

# English Learner's Dictionaries in the Israel School System

by Raphael Gefen

The Israel Ministry of Education and Culture has had a good deal of experience in the use of dictionaries in English matriculation exams.

Following a general decision to allow the use of auxiliary material during examinations in all subjects, students in English were allowed, beginning in the mid-1970s, to use a monolingual English learner's dictionary, such as Oxford Student's Dictionary or Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary. This was both at the "Ordinary Level" (the so-called 4 Points examination) and at the higher "Advanced Level" (5 Points).

The students gained a greater feeling of security by being allowed to use a dictionary in the examination, and thus the compilers of the test passages and questions were able to select more difficult and authentic material for the exams. In addition, there were extensive repercussions in the classroom. A top-to-bottom reform such as this introduced from "above" brought about extensive changes in the curriculum and in classroom techniques, and led to exercises and instructions in textbooks on the use of dictionaries. It also resulted in teachers educating pupils in dictionary-using techniques, and pupils using a dictionary in class and for homework.

Nevertheless, the English-English learner's dictionary, although written in simplified language, did not prove to be up to expectation in use and led to student dissatisfaction. Since it imposes a rigid ban on translation, students would get a *general* idea of the meaning only - the "fluency" or "pragmatic competence", as posited by current theories of communicative

competence. Yet what they wanted to know was the exact meaning of the headword.

At the same time, feedback from research in reading comprehension at Haifa and Tel Aviv Universities - and from classroom experience in schools - became available. This showed conclusively that the most effective way of determining whether a text has been correctly comprehended is to elicit responses in the mother tongue rather than in the foreign language (English in this case). These researches confirmed current psycholinguistic theory, which views the mother tongue as a positive element in foreign language learning and which calls upon teachers to drop their educational pretence that the learner has no mother tongue.

All changes in education proceed slowly and by a process of persuasion. Even the "top-to-bottom" reform of allowing dictionaries in the examination room took two or three years of work to prepare teachers for the change. The Ministry was persuaded by the results of these researches and feedback to allow the English-English-Hebrew and English-English-Arabic dictionaries (published by Kernerman Publishing) for use in the "Ordinary Level" English exam. The monolingual dictionary was, however, still specified for the "Advanced Level" test.

This change was introduced in 1988 and proved very successful. It clearly responded to student needs, both in class and in the examination room. The only difficulty was for the new immigrant pupils, of whom there are a large number in the Israeli

educational system, whose mother tongue is neither Hebrew or Arabic. For them, English is the third language, not the second. They are allowed to use an ordinary English-Russian or English-Amharic dictionary. However, where they *do* use the semi-bilingual dictionary, their Hebrew improves due to the definitions and the example sentences in English, whereas using the bilingual dictionary often results in uncertainties.

The same arguments and researches that led to the introduction of the semi-bilingual dictionary at the "Ordinary Level", together with the ongoing classroom experience of teachers and pupils, have recently led the English Committee of the Ministry of Education to decide to replace monolingual with semi-bilingual dictionaries also at the "Advanced Level" starting in 1996. This committee was chaired by Professor Bernard Spolsky, the internationally known applied linguist, and consisted of teachers, teacher-trainers, university lecturers and Ministry inspectors. The decision has been welcomed enthusiastically by both the teaching profession and the students.

I believe that this Israeli experience will prove of interest to educators in other countries as well.

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## Semi-Trilingualism

Although English has become the *de facto* international language taught at most schools, many countries have their own second or minority language. In Israel, for example, Russian is used by recent immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and thus last year Kernerman Publishing issued a Russian version of its semi-bilingual Hebrew elementary edition: *Oxford Elementary Dictionary, English-English-Hebrew-Russian* (see extract).

Tri-lingualism is an important issue in former Soviet republics, whose inhabitants are at times more fluent in Russian than in their national languages. The issue is also of major concern in Francophone Africa, where a native tongue is spoken at home, French (the official language) at school or work, and English is used as a means of communication with the world at large. Situations of this sort exist in many countries with multilingual societies.

**positive** *adj.* sure; certain: Are you positive that you put the key in your pocket?

**уверенный** בטוח; חיובי

**positively** *adv.* definitely; certainly.

**уверенно** בהחלט

**possess** *v.* have or own something: He lost all that he possessed when his house burned down.

**владеть** להיות לו; להיות בעל

**possession** *n.* 1 (no pl.) having or owning something.

**собственность; имущество** בעלות

**for possession of**, to get or take something: The players fought for possession of the ball.

**за обладание** כדי לתפוס/לקחת את