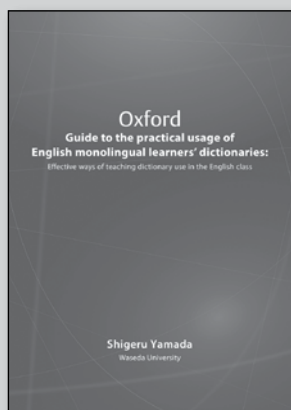


Shigeru Yamada. Oxford Guide to the practical usage of English monolingual learners' dictionaries: Effective ways of teaching dictionary use in the English class



Oxford Guide to the practical usage of English monolingual learners' dictionaries: Effective ways of teaching dictionary use in the English class

Shigeru Yamada

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http://oupjapan.co.jp/teachers/resources/oup_guide_to_dictionary_use_2014_E.pdf/

This short guide combines a general introduction to dictionaries and their receptive and productive functions (pp1-10), with a set of classroom activities in dictionary use, all designed to demonstrate the value of using a dictionary rather than any of the more alluring alternatives on offer (pp10-16).

There is much to like here, and the guide is full of sensible advice. Yamada acknowledges that, for most learners, a monolingual dictionary of their target language can look intimidating, and he recognises that “some may find the task of consulting a dictionary troublesome”. In the past, learners have generally preferred bilingual dictionaries to monolinguals, and now the Web offers a range of other options too, such as automatic translation sites or forums like Word Reference (<http://forum.wordreference.com/>). All of this creates tough competition for the traditional monolingual learner’s dictionary (MLD). But Yamada makes a spirited case for the benefits of MLDs, seeing dictionary use as “a learning opportunity”.

This gets to the heart of the matter, and it’s useful to think about this in terms of learners’ short-term and longer-term goals. In the short term you may need to decode an unfamiliar word encountered while reading, or resolve a communicative problem in order to complete an assignment. This is where a “quick fix” is in order, and MLDs are not always well-adapted to this role. But if your longer-term goal is to become proficient in a second language, the process of consulting an MLD brings benefits in terms of learning (as opposed to merely problem-solving). As noted here, “by reading English-language definitions, learners get greater exposure to English and learn the language within its own system”. This comes up in the section where the author compares definitions in MLDs with translation equivalents in bilingual dictionaries, and demonstrates that – given the anisomorphism of language systems as different from each other as Japanese and English – one-to-one equivalents rarely tell the whole story. But as he concedes, “this actually presents no major problems when confirming the meaning of specific things such as flora and fauna”. This observation perhaps points to future developments. Digital dictionaries can use different media

for different purposes, and for certain types of word a conventional definition is less helpful than, say, an image, a video, or a sound file. The function of definitions, as Bolinger observed 50 years ago, is “to help people grasp meanings [by supplying] a series of hints and associations that will relate the unknown to something known” (Bolinger, D. 1965. The atomization of meaning. *Language* 41: 555-573). And if that job can be done more efficiently through nonverbal media, perhaps that is what we should focus on in such cases.

The guide also explains the features that distinguish MLDs from other kinds of monolingual dictionary, emphasizing the “approachability” of the definitions and examples. This is an important argument – more so than ever now, when every type of dictionary is freely available. A language learner who looks up *condescension* in Wiktionary (en.wiktionary.org), for example, is unlikely to get beyond the first definition:

The act of condescending; voluntary descent from one’s rank or dignity in intercourse with an inferior

Even I am having problems working out what this means, and in the unlikely event of a learner successfully decoding the definition, it wouldn’t solve any problems because it fails to correspond to any normal use of the word. (The definition is in fact lifted, verbatim, from an ancient Webster’s dictionary.) This is the kind of thing that gives monolingual dictionaries a bad name, and Yamada is right to stress the superiority of corpus-based MLDs over many of the free offerings on the Web.

Classroom activities for dictionaries typically focus on specific data types (information on meaning, collocation, and the like), in order to familiarize users with the way different kinds of information are conveyed and thus to facilitate dictionary use. What is interesting (and original) here is that the process of consulting a dictionary is framed in terms of seven distinct steps, and activities are proposed for most of these. Dictionary consultation is seen as a “complex intellectual activity” (even if proficient users perform it unconsciously), which proceeds from recognising the communicative problem and determining what the problematic word or multiword unit is, through finding the “right” information

in the dictionary, extracting the data you need, and applying this information in order to resolve your problem. Along the way, a number of definition conventions are helpfully explained. Some of the advice on finding the appropriate entry is less applicable to digital dictionaries than to traditional print-based ones: finding phrasal verbs and idioms, for example, is far easier in a well-structured online dictionary, where the trend is for these to be separate entries (rather than “nested” at the end of a base form). Intelligent search algorithms take you straight to an idiom even if you don’t know the exact canonical form. (Locating *close/shut the stable door after the horse has bolted* in a paper dictionary was as big a problem for users as deciding where to put it was for lexicographers. No more.)

One task lists a number of common English words and expressions (such as *not bad*), and asks users to compare the English definition with a corresponding translation equivalent in an English-Japanese dictionary. This is a neat way of showing how items like these don’t always map conveniently from one language to another, and again makes the case for using an MLD.

The guide is aimed at Japanese learners of English, but much of it would be useful for teachers and learners with other first languages. And though produced for a particular dictionary publisher (OUP), it is far more than a mere promotional tool. The advice it gives is refreshingly even-handed and all the main MLDs are referred to at different points. (One quibble is that the URL given for the *Macmillan Dictionary* site is for a long-defunct version: the correct address is <http://macmillandictionary.com/>.)

There is occasionally an elegiac feel about the guide, in that some of the advice relates to using print dictionaries, and it is hard to imagine the average high-school student in Japan (now by definition a digital native) consulting one of these (unless forced to!). And perhaps more could have been said about some of the excellent complementary resources available on the Web. While students are advised (p13) to use the “example banks” in dictionary CD-ROMs to match examples to word senses, many would feel more at home with a Web resource such as SKELL (<http://skell.sketchengine.co.uk/>).

In the end, we are left with the question

of whether teaching dictionary use is a worthwhile project in itself. Yamada believes that, when a user’s search for information is unsuccessful, “either the dictionary or the user is to blame”. My default position is that if users can’t readily find what they are looking for, the fault lies squarely with the dictionary. Consequently, the onus is on dictionary producers to ensure that information is easy to locate and easy to digest – an approach which feels more in tune with the way that software products are designed nowadays so that no instruction manual is needed. Few students will be fortunate enough to have a teacher who understands dictionaries as well as the author of the guide. In most cases, they must rely on their dictionary being well enough designed to make its use intuitive. Having said that, this guide will give teachers who are not especially dictionary-aware the resources to demonstrate to their students the benefits of using a monolingual learner’s dictionary.

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Semi-Automatically Generated Multilingual Glossaries

KD’s updated English Multilingual Dictionary (EMD, see p25) now serves as a base for developing new multilingual glossaries for other languages. The process begins by reverse-engineering the Password dictionary data (which is at the heart of the EMD) in order to produce a raw index for each language to English. Next, a dedicated software tool is used to manually edit and refine the index, including the linking of each L1 headword to the corresponding sense(s) of the original English entries. Finally, the translations from all other languages to every particular sense in the EMD are associated automatically, turning the L1-English index into an L1 multilingual glossary with translations to 43 languages. So far, multilingual glossaries were created for these 20 languages:

Catalan | Chinese Simplified | Danish | Dutch | Estonian | French | German | Hungarian | Indonesian | Italian | Japanese | Norwegian | Polish | Portuguese Brazil | Portuguese Portugal | Romanian | Russian | Slovene | Spanish | Swedish