

Using online dictionaries in English language courses

I love dictionaries. What's more, my students love dictionaries. I remember when I first saw a CD-ROM dictionary. The presenter demonstrated: "If you don't know a word in the definition, double click on it, and you are taken immediately to a definition of that word!" This was my introduction to hyperlinks, and I was hooked. Since that memorable moment, I have used both print and electronic dictionaries with my learners, moving from CD-ROM to DVD-ROM, to online dictionaries and apps, deftly sidestepping the ubiquitous electronic dictionaries so beloved of my students.

This article looks at on-line learners' dictionaries. It first describes one such dictionary, the Collins COBUILD dictionary. It then looks at some of the practicalities of using online dictionaries. Finally, it outlines a number of practical teaching ideas I have used with my learners.

Collins COBUILD online

The first COBUILD dictionary appeared in 1988. The pioneering work of John Sinclair at the University of Birmingham meant that learners' dictionaries could include information on word frequency.

Like many learners dictionaries on the internet, Collins COBUILD online is free. Visit: <http://www.collinsdictionary.com/>

The section of most relevance for English Language Teaching is the learner's dictionary. Users simply type in a word, hit enter and hey presto, they have a definition. Users can click on the audio symbol to hear the word. You can select if you prefer to hear a word in British English, or American English.

If you are not sure how to spell a word, and enter an approximation, you generate a question 'Did you mean...' with a menu of words you were possibly searching for. This is a useful feature, as students may not know how to spell the word they are looking up.

Word frequency is displayed through red 'circles', as shown in the graphic.



Less frequent words have no 'circles'. These 'circles' show frequency as follows:

5 circles – the commonest words in English (just over 700 words)

4 circles – just over 1,000 words
3 circles – just over 1500 words
2 circles – just over 3,000 words
1 circle – just over 8,000 words
No circle – the remaining words in the dictionary, approximately 17,900

I will now look at some practical considerations for using online dictionaries

Practicalities

Let me describe some typical teaching situations with differing access to the internet:

Situation one: no internet access in the classroom.

You can use your on-line dictionary before your class to prepare; you can suggest an online dictionary for your students to access after the lesson.

Situation two: internet access via a teacher computer.

You can demonstrate online dictionaries to your students. You can have students come out to the front to perform searches.

Situation three: some or all learners have internet access, on individual computers, or mobile devices (Smartphones and tablets)

Students can do classroom activities such as reading while accessing an online dictionary.

I will now examine some advantages and disadvantages to using online dictionaries.

Advantages

They are free!

The dictionary can be updated in a fraction of a second. So, an online dictionary can contain more neologisms than a print dictionary.

There are no restrictions on space in terms of page layout. Again, this is significantly different to the restrictions on a printed page.

The user can sometimes choose the level of detail they wish to see, using the buttons: 'Show more' / 'show less'.

Disadvantages

Users are reliant on the vagaries of the internet, with all the tech problems that this implies

Users of online dictionaries may be subjected to a never-ending stream of adverts, some of which appear depending on the search terms you are using. This is the 'price you pay' for using a free service

You cannot use the 'record – compare – re-record' feature which is available on a CD-ROM, although this wonderful feature is creeping into dictionary apps

Students accessing online dictionaries on mobile devices in class may succumb to the attractions of the web, and end up off-task, checking their Facebook status or sending Instant Messages

No doubt, we can add further advantages and disadvantages to using on-line dictionaries. The very fact that students can access an online dictionary anytime, anywhere means, for me, they are a vital part of their repertoire of useful resources, and can prove invaluable for language study.

I will now outline ten practical teaching ideas involving on-line dictionaries.

Practical teaching ideas

I have divided these ideas into three groups: those which need preparation before the class; those used in-class; and those for students to do independently.

Practical ideas part one: pre-class preparation

Using vocabulary cards

Decide on a set of words which you wish your students to match to their definitions. These could be words you are pre-teaching from an article. Copy the dictionary definitions from an online dictionary, cutting and pasting them into a document. You can then create a set of word and definition cards for students to match.

6-8 cards works well. Selecting some known words, some unknown words and some guessable words creates the right amount of cognitive challenge. Laminating cards means you can re-use them with other groups.

Preparing word frequency quizzes

In my experience, students often know very little about how frequent a word is. They take notes on some fairly obscure words which they may never meet again.

Select some words which you would like your students to categorize by frequency. Check their word frequency on an on-line dictionary first. Then, put the words on a worksheet and print it out for use in-class. The students should transfer the words to the correct column, first guessing the word frequency individually, and then comparing their answers in pairs or small groups. This is an awareness-raising exercise. It is not vital that students actually get the right answer; rather, the process of considering how common a word is important.

Such quizzes can be used to show students how to use the new Vocabulary Organizer. This spiral-bound notebook allows students to record new words systematically. It is divided in two sections. Section one is for words which students wish to use, in speech or in writing; section two is for words which students need to recognise only, and is arranged alphabetically. In section one, students can record useful information about words, such as different meanings and forms, pronunciation notes, and collocations. If a word has a frequency of two, three, four or five circles (i.e. approximately 6,200 words), students should record it in Part one of their Organizers.

Practical ideas part two: in-class

Using the pronunciation symbols

Keep open a tab with a link to the online dictionary during a lesson. Whenever there is a communication breakdown due to a student being unable to pronounce a word, open the tab, search for the word, and click on the audio symbol next to each word to model it. Alternatively, open the online dictionary and deal with all the problematic words at the end of the lesson. Students soon realise they can listen to these words themselves at home.

Using a 'dictionary-types' worksheet

Put the students in groups, and ask them to brainstorm the pros and cons of various types of dictionaries (bi-lingual / CD-ROM / online), using a worksheet like this one:

Dictionary types – pros and cons

Bi-lingual dictionary / translator	
Pros	Cons
English-English learner's Dictionary Paperback	
Pros	Cons
CD-ROM	
Pros	Cons
Internet	
Pros	Cons

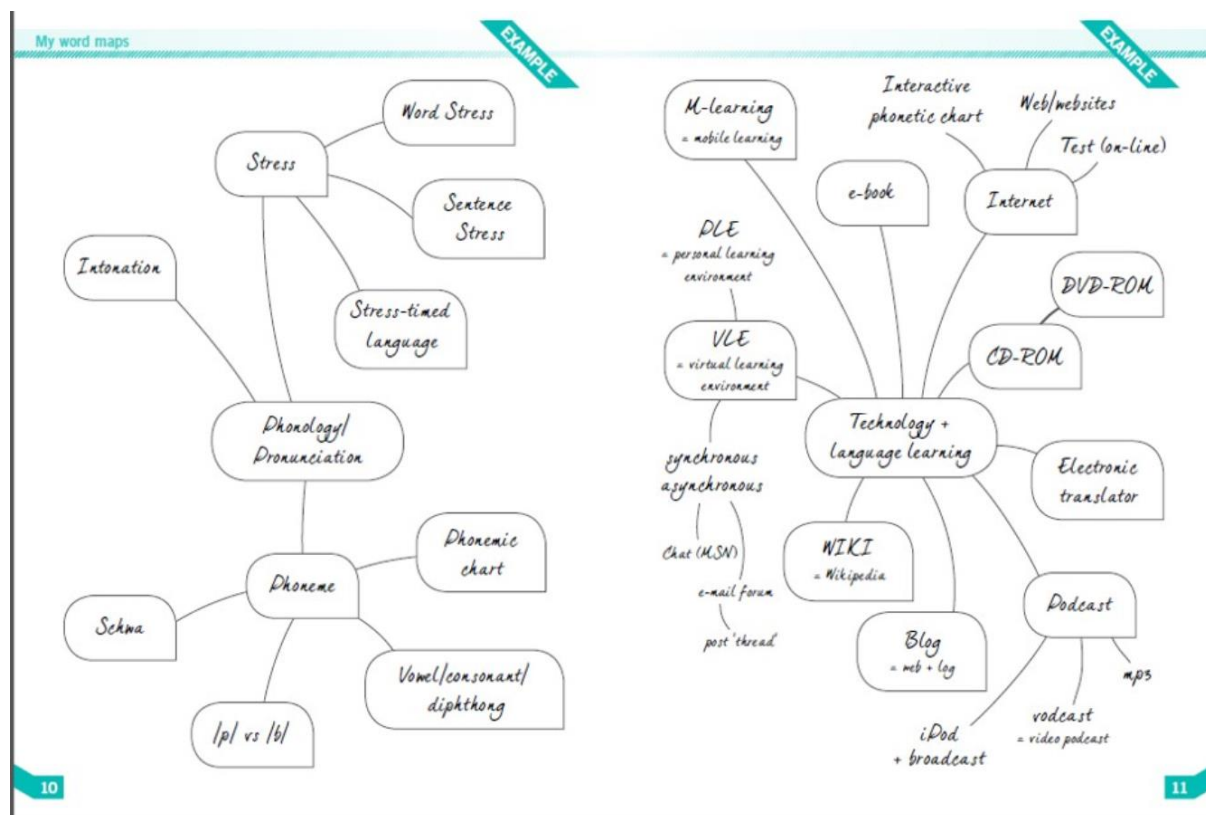
Then, elicit ideas from each group in turn. This task raises awareness of the different types of dictionary which are available. It is useful for students to reflect on the inadequacies of a bi-lingual dictionary for productive purposes, such as essay-writing. Point out that cross-checking words in a bi-lingual dictionary on a mono-lingual, learners' dictionary is a useful strategy.

Another thing I've learnt from doing this task is that many students have never loaded or explored a CD-ROM dictionary, so are unaware of the excellent feature mentioned earlier which allows them to record and re-record themselves in order to improve their pronunciation.

Researching a key word

We remember more words when we meet them in context, rather than randomly. The Vocabulary Organizer includes word-map templates for students to complete. Ask students to use the Thesaurus

function on their online dictionary to explore words to add to a diagram of one of their own key words. Some examples of completed word diagrams are provided as models:



Mapping words can also help with word-formation, one of the trickiest areas of vocabulary.

Practical ideas part three – post class

Adding a new word to a dictionary

When does a word become a word which is accepted in everyday usage? When it goes into the dictionary, is one answer! As many as 3-4 new words enter our language per day, and clearly, online dictionaries are easier to update than print dictionaries.

Some online dictionaries allow users to suggest words to go into the dictionary. Find out from your group if anyone has encountered a new word which they would like to see added to the dictionary. On the Collins online dictionary, you need to sign up first. After that, you can e-mail a word to the publisher to consider adding to the dictionary. Imagine your student's pleasure if a lexicographer agrees and includes the term, so your student's name appears in the online dictionary alongside the word they have suggested!

This feature provides an insight into how dictionaries of the future may be compiled; they will be crowd-sourced, as well as being built on words researched and added by lexicographers.

Using specialist dictionaries

When I worked as an ESP (English for Specific purposes) teacher, I would recommend specialised paperback or CD-ROM dictionaries to my students, such as technical, financial or medical

dictionaries. Nowadays, there are a wealth of such dictionaries on the Internet. Visit:
<http://www.yourdictionary.com/diction4.html>

In conclusion

As I look around my classroom, I don't see so many print dictionaries. I do see students accessing dictionaries on mobile phones or tablets. I often wonder which dictionaries they are using – doubtless something free which may (or may not) be helpful, well-researched and based on a corpus. I believe it is part of my role as a teacher to introduce students to electronic tools, including a free, online dictionary which will help them with, among other things, word frequency and pronunciation. I love dictionaries. And so, I am glad to say, do my students.

Further reading

Vocabulary Organizer (Pete Sharma and Barney Barrett) Collins 2014

Bio

Pete Sharma is a consultant and training manager for Pete Sharma Associates (www.psa.eu.com). He works as a lecturer in EAP (English for Academic Purposes) on pre-sessional courses for Warwick University, UK. As an ELT author, his publications include resource books on technology-enhanced language learning and (as co-author) the Vocabulary Organizer (Collins 2014).

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