

The specification of dictionary reference skills in Higher Education

Nesi, H.

Published version deposited in CURVE August 2015

Original citation & hyperlink:

Nesi, H. (1999) The specification of dictionary reference skills in Higher Education. In *Dictionaries in Language Learning: Recommendations, National Reports and Thematic Reports from the TNP Sub-Project 9: Dictionaries* (pp. 53-67) Berlin:Freie Universität. http://www.celelc.org/projects/Past_Projects/TNP_Languages/TNP1/index.html

Copyright © and Moral Rights are retained by the author(s) and/ or other copyright owners. A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or study, without prior permission or charge. This item cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first obtaining permission in writing from the copyright holder(s). The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holders.

CURVE is the Institutional Repository for Coventry University

<http://curve.coventry.ac.uk/open>

THEMATIC REPORT 3

THE SPECIFICATION OF DICTIONARY REFERENCE SKILLS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Hilary Nesi

University of Warwick

1. Introduction: A taxonomy of reference skills at university level

This report is in three parts. The first part lists the dictionary skills that might be taught at university level, the second part reports on the way these skills are actually being taught by informants at a range of universities in the UK and overseas, and the third part reports on my informants' attitudes and beliefs relating to the teaching of dictionary skills.

The following list aims to be exhaustive, including all the skills that a university-level language student might need in order to use dictionaries effectively. The skills vary in difficulty and degree of abstraction but are grouped chronologically rather than according to level, the first five groups representing stages in the process of dictionary use, starting with the choice of which dictionary(-ies) to have available for consultation, and ending with the application and recording of dictionary information. Skills that are independent of the consultation process are listed at stage six.

Stage one: Before study

1. Knowing what types of dictionary exist, and choosing which dictionary/ies to consult and/or buy
2. Knowing what kinds of information are found in dictionaries and other types of reference works

Stage two: Before dictionary consultation

3. Deciding whether dictionary consultation is necessary
4. Deciding what to look up
5. Deciding on the appropriate form of the look-up item
6. Deciding which dictionary is most likely to satisfy the purpose of the consultation
7. Contextual guessing of the meaning of the look-up item
8. Identifying the word class of the look-up item

Stage three: Locating entry information

9. Understanding the structure of the dictionary
10. Understanding alphabetization and letter distribution
11. Understanding grapho-phonemic correspondence (and the lack of it)
12. Understanding the use of wildcards in electronic dictionary searches
13. Choosing amongst homonyms
14. Finding derived forms
15. Finding multi-word units
16. Understanding the cross-referencing system in print dictionaries, and hyperlinking in electronic dictionaries

Stage four: Interpreting entry information

17. Distinguishing the component parts of the entry
18. Distinguishing relevant from irrelevant information
19. Finding information about the spelling of words

20. Understanding typographical conventions and the use of symbols, numbered superscripts, punctuation
21. Interpreting IPA and pronunciation information
22. Interpreting etymological information
23. Interpreting morphological and syntactic information
24. Interpreting the definition or translation
25. Interpreting information about collocations
26. Interpreting information about idiomatic and figurative use
27. Deriving information from examples
28. Interpreting restrictive labels
29. Referring to additional dictionary information (in front matter, appendices, hypertext links).
30. Verifying and applying look-up information

Stage five: Recording entry information

31. Sifting entry information
32. Deciding how to record entry information
33. Compiling a vocabulary notebook or file of index cards
34. Using the notebook section of an electronic dictionary

Stage six: Understanding lexicographical issues

35. Knowing what people use dictionaries for
36. Knowing lexicographical terminology
37. Understanding principles and processes of dictionary compilation
38. Recognizing different defining and translating styles
39. Comparing entries
40. Dictionary criticism and evaluation

2. The specification of dictionary skills at university level

The primary source of data for this report was the response to an e-mail query sent to five mailing lists: *sysfling* (for academics with an interest in Systemic Functional Linguistics), *baleap* (for members of the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes), *baalpg* (for postgraduate researchers belonging to the British Association for Applied Linguistics), *lang-asst-trg* (for those involved in the training of language assistants), and *ucml-teaching* (for university lecturers in modern languages). For website information see the Bibliography and Resource List at the end of the volume.

In each case I initially asked list members for information regarding the specification of dictionary skills in university language syllabuses and/or course materials. Responses were received from 35 lecturers, who taught one or more of the following subjects: Linguistics, Chinese, English (EFL, ESL, EAP and ESP), French, German, Italian, Japanese and Spanish. Most of my informants were based at UK universities, but messages also arrived from Australia, Brunei, Denmark, France, Israel, Japan and Russia. All those who responded are gratefully acknowledged at the end of this report.

In some cases informants wrote to tell me that little or no dictionary user training was taking place in their department. In other cases the initial query resulted in extensive discussion of skills specifications, and some informants also cited (or sent me) relevant articles and materials they had written and/or had used for the teaching of dictionary skills. Because the amount of information received from each informant varied, and because my informants were self-selecting and therefore had a particular interest in the teaching of dictionary skills, this report does not present quantitative information about the extent of dictionary skills training at university level. Trends do emerge, and there are many examples of good practice, but the informants are not treated as a representative sample of the entire population of language lecturers at university level. Where numbers of informants are mentioned, they are not intended to indicate a percentage of the entire population of informants, or of language lecturers generally;

informants volunteered information on topics that they considered important, and none chose to comment on every possible dictionary skill.

As a secondary source of data for this report I also referred to other published syllabuses and lists of skills. The most notable of these are Gethin & Gunnemark's advice to undergraduate dictionary users (1996), Berwick & Horsfall's guide to the teaching of dictionary skills at secondary level (1996), and, although intended for use in primary schools, the specifications in *The National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* (1998). I did not examine a broad range of dictionary workbooks or university-level language textbooks (this would require two further reports at least), but I have drawn on Stark's (1990) survey review of 40 dictionary workbooks, and I have also looked at the dictionary skills specified in the textbooks the informants themselves said that they used for university-level language teaching.

2.1 Stage one: Before study

Choosing a dictionary is the first operation in the process of dictionary consultation, according to Scholfield (1982). Training in this skills area might include discussion of bi-directional bilingual dictionaries, 'mono-bilingual' or 'bilingualized' dictionaries intended for native speakers of only one of the two languages featured, monolingual dictionaries for native and non-native speakers, specialist and technical dictionaries, thesauruses, thematic dictionaries, and dictionaries in electronic form. Such training would enable students to make informed choices about dictionary purchase, and would be particularly useful to learners of popular modern languages who have a wide choice of dictionaries to choose from.

Published materials do not cover this skills area well. According to Stark (1990:202), 'few workbooks have provided guidance on the range of dictionaries and their individual purposes'. Guides to dictionary use such as Gethin & Gunnemark (1996) and Berwick & Horsfall (1996) tend to concentrate on the monolingual/bilingual distinction, without much reference to other types of dictionary, and EAP textbooks providing dictionary skills training make little mention of bilingual dictionaries and technical dictionaries, despite the fact that English for Academic Purposes is often geared to the needs of students of science and technology.

There are good reasons why published sources provide such a limited picture of dictionary provision. Most dictionary workbooks are designed to support the use of one particular dictionary, rather than encourage the use of a wide range of reference books. Some textbooks are written for use by native-speakers of different languages, so they cannot treat bilingual dictionary skills in any depth. Moreover, most textbooks are designed to be used in all kinds of educational environments, with or without library and bookshop facilities.

One respondent involved in distance education gave lack of resources as a reason for not including 'choosing a dictionary' as a syllabus item: 'We cannot assume that our students have access to a whole range of reference books'. She also noted that, despite the fact that colleagues were interested in IT, 'we must always keep in mind those of our students who have no access to the Internet or even to individual electronic aids. We function on a very strict Equal Opportunities system!'

Although the majority of respondents seemed to centre dictionary skills training around one or two dictionaries that all students were recommended to buy, some respondents did report that they provided training in the skill of choosing a dictionary. In four cases it was reported that students were introduced to a limited range of reference books as the need arose, because they were 'scattered about' in the classroom, or because tasks were set which required the consultation of a variety of dictionaries. In other cases course outlines included an introduction to a broader range of dictionary types, with specific

reference to thesauruses, encyclopedias, bilingual dictionaries, monolingual dictionaries for native and non-native speakers, specialist dictionaries and, in one case, parallel concordances. One informant provided students with a computer printout of all the dictionaries in the library, which constituted a good selection of modern works.

In his textbooks for first year undergraduates studying French, Nott (1993 and 1998) discusses the roles of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries and points out that larger dictionaries will provide more guidance on meaning and use. Wise's (1997) university-level French vocabulary coursebook contains projects involving the use of many types of reference materials, including encyclopedias, thesauruses, etymological dictionaries, dictionaries of place names, dictionaries of Anglicisms, the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE on CD-ROM, multimedia encyclopedias, and on-line corpora.

The CELTE Self-Access Centre website developed at Warwick University with sponsorship from the British Association of Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP), is primarily intended for EAP students attending pre-sessional and in-sessional courses at British universities. The dictionary section of the site is designed to help students and their families choose what dictionaries they should buy or access, and provides information about a very wide range of English language dictionaries, including the major dictionaries for advanced learners of English, visual and photo dictionaries, specialist and technical dictionaries for native and non-native speakers, and dictionaries on CD-ROM and on the World Wide Web.

A number of other university language departments have websites with links to on-line dictionaries, although they do not evaluate these links or compare them to print-based resources. Examples of such sites are the English Language Unit at the University of Kent, and *Recursos* at the Language Centre, University of Brighton (website addresses listed at the end of the volume).

2.2 Stage two: Before dictionary consultation

According to Horsfall (1997:7), 'one of the most useful dictionary skills is to know when **not** to use a dictionary'. Berwick & Horsfall (1996:18-20) pay the skill some attention, and specify the questions that English-speaking language learners at secondary school should ask themselves before they use a dictionary. These include, while reading:

- *Do I really need to know the meaning?*
- *Can I work out the meaning from context, using my common sense?*

Textbooks commonly teach contextual guessing as a strategy for dealing with unknown words, either as an alternative to dictionary consultation or as a necessary pre-consultation stage. For example Nott (1993:16, 1998:22) provides exercises of the following type:

Pour chacun des mots ci-dessous....

(a) essayez de vous faire une idée de son sens en étudiant son contexte immédiat (la phrase où il se trouve)

(b) consultez un dictionnaire français/français pour vérifier le sens du mot dans le contexte où il se trouve.

One informant sent me a course outline for an EAP programme which listed, along with other types of contextual guessing strategy, the recognition of 'lexical familiarization' while reading. 'Lexical familiarization' (a term coined by Williams 1980) is a technique used in subject textbooks to explain unknown technical terms to non-specialist readers. Before reaching for the dictionary, EAP readers were urged to check that new terminology was not defined by the textbook writer within the text itself.

Some of my informants reported wariness about unnecessary dictionary consultation. Two believed that dictionary skills teaching was unnecessary on ab-initio courses 'I discourage the use of dictionaries, urging students to apply their knowledge of related languages instead'. One mentioned that students on a self-study programme were 'encouraged to break words down into their components and also to refer to the context as well as cognates before reaching for the dictionary'. Nott (1998:22) advises students that 'If you use a dictionary too often, you will spoil the pleasure of the text you are reading or listening to'. Fears were expressed more strongly by a respondent who wrote of a departmental perception that dictionaries might be 'dependence-generating' and counter-productive if used to fill in basic gaps in language knowledge.

Bishop (1998:7) thinks that tutors are happier about monolingual dictionary use, but 'fear that the bilingual dictionary somehow has a negative effect on learning'. He notes that 'most teachers do encourage students to think about the exact meaning of the words they are about to look up', but in a survey of 25 Open University students of French he found that a third 'simply open their dictionary' when they encounter an unknown word, without giving any prior thought to context or likely meaning.

For Scholfield (1982), the second step in the dictionary consultation process is 'identifying the problem area, word or phrase'. Stark (1990:197) reports that dictionary workbooks do not deal with the skill of establishing which lexical item poses a problem, but notes that this 'is not disturbing ...since it is not exclusive to dictionary use'. None of my informants referred to this skill and it is not specified in any of the published sources I examined, perhaps because it is regarded as one of the subskills needed to decide whether or not to consult a dictionary. Choosing between a word or a phrase as the look-up item has important implications for the look-up process, however, and tasks which pre-identify the phrases that learners must look up (see stage three below) may not do much to develop the skill of recognizing multi-word units in context.

Scholfield (1982) also regards 'guessing what form the word will be listed under' as a separate skill, and this is specified in more detail by Barnard (1989:25), who points out that 'knowledge of morphology and syntax' and 'the ability to use existing knowledge of the language to make intelligent guesses' are needed by users of English dictionaries to determine which form will be given headword treatment. Several EAP textbooks, such as O'Brien & Jordan (1985), train users to refer to context to establish the word class of the look-up word. This may be a more important skill for English language users than for users of languages where word morphology gives greater indication of word class. Nott's textbooks (1993, 1998) warn users of bilingual dictionaries that they should work out the word class of the English word before searching for its French equivalent, 'afin de distinguer entre *une goutte* et *laisser tomber* ("drop") ou *un bâton* et *coller* ("stick")'.

Lecturers in Japanese and Chinese drew attention to the special demands of non-alphabetic dictionary use, and differentiated between two methods of locating dictionary information in Japanese and Chinese dictionaries - via phonological form, and via the radical parts and strokes of the written character. One informant also mentioned the use of an alphabetized index, as discussed in Mair (1991).

Berwick & Horsfall (1996:6) point out that users 'need to understand how headwords operate and how they are marked out in their dictionary', and suggest some activities to help learners distinguish likely headwords (such as infinitives and uninflected adjectives) from forms that are unlikely to be given headword status (such as parts of a verb paradigm, or inflected nouns). Policy varies from dictionary to dictionary, however. For example, according to Barnard (1989:26), transparent compounds and predictable derived forms are more likely to be given headword status in learners' dictionaries than in dictionaries designed for native speakers.

A further skill at this stage in the look-up process is that of deciding which dictionary to use. Whitcut (1986:121) advocates that 'people should become aware of which dictionary is most suitable for a particular purpose: monolingual native speaker, monolingual learners', bilingual, specialized and technical'. Dictionary users with this skill can identify the type of information they want to find out, and apply prior knowledge of different dictionary types to decide which dictionary is most likely to supply this information. The skill involves predicting not only the quantity and quality of information that a given dictionary is likely to provide, but also whether the dictionary is likely to list the look-up item. For writing tasks, Nott (1993:15) advises bilingual dictionary use 'pour certains mots techniques, spécialisés, etc.' and monolingual dictionary use 'pour les autres mots ou expressions'. Barnard (1989:25) points out that dictionary users need 'knowledge of what not to look up' and should learn to avoid consulting the dictionary for the meaning of proper names, which will not be listed.

2.3 Stage three: Locating entry information

Dictionary skills specifications tend to concentrate on stages three and four of the consultation process, and direct or indirect teaching about dictionary macrostructure is mentioned both in the literature and in comments from my informants.

Published materials frequently teach alphabetical ordering. This is probably the most extensively treated dictionary skill in the EAP study skills textbooks, and there are also exercises to practise letter order and distribution in Berwick & Horsfall (1996) and on the CELTE Self-Access Centre website. Stark (1990) found that 57.1% of the dictionary workbooks he examined provided some practice in the alphabetic ordering of entries. He noted, however, that workbooks did not always deal with variations from strict alphabetic organization, and 'often overlooked' issues concerning the placing of compounds, fixed expressions, short forms, and phrasal and prepositional verbs. Two of my informants treated alphabetical ordering as a priority in dictionary skills training. Both of these were based overseas, and one taught students whose first language did not use the Roman alphabet.

Allied to the skill of alphabetical ordering is an understanding of the relationship between sound and spelling in the target language. This is regarded by Stark as 'basic information', and he found that it was largely ignored in dictionary workbooks. Clearly the relationship is more straightforward in some languages than in others; Barnard (1989:26) comments on the difficulty learners of English face, for example, when searching for words according to pronunciation, or pronouncing words with reference to their form. *Accent Français*, an interactive CD-ROM developed at the University of New England in Australia (Epps, forthcoming) practises strategies for deducing the pronunciation of written French words, and the self-access tasks sent by one informant for use with the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE also provided lots of opportunities to consider French sound-spelling correspondence. Wise's textbook (1997:57) contains tasks to investigate the link between morphology and spelling. For example:

- Identify the orthographic elements in the following words which:*
- (a) reflect their etymological origins rather than their pronunciation*
 - (b) serve to disambiguate the word from a homophone*
 - (c) connect it with morphologically related forms*

Barnard (1989:26) draws attention to the fact that 'different words with the same spelling, the same sound, or with both the same spelling and sound may present problems to the user of the dictionary'. Homonyms, and the distinction between homonymy and polysemy, are the topic of projects suggested by Wise (1997:129), and are featured in the outline for an undergraduate language and linguistics course sent by

one informant, and in the self-access course another informant used with the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE.

Many informants set their learners tasks to practise locating entry information, and although Stark found that dictionary workbooks neglected multiword lexical items, several of the tasks described to me by informants involved looking up the meaning of idioms, colloquialisms and jokes. Even if the problem of deciding which word in the idiom to look up (as discussed in Béjoint 1981, Bogaards 1990) was not openly discussed, exercises of this type must alert users to systems of organizing information in their dictionaries. Published sources tend to neglect this aspect of user knowledge, as Stark (1990:198) points out.

Stark also found that 'the location of derivatives within the alphabetic list tends to be overlooked by workbooks' (1990:201). Attention was paid to this area by some informants, however. One sent me a course outline including the item 'derived words: where to find them in the dictionary', and Wise (1997:19) draws attention to both the separate lists of affixes and Latin and Greek morphemes in the larger French dictionaries, and the ROBERT MÉTHODIQUE (1990) 'which lists lexical morphemes - roots, prefixes and suffixes - as well as words, with indications of how these elements combine'.

Berwick & Horsfall (1996) mention the skill of recognizing the two part structure of a bilingual dictionary - a skill that cannot be transferred from monolingual dictionary use. Most learners at university level are already familiar with the organization of a bilingual dictionary, and this is probably why it is not mentioned as a training need by my informants. The semi- or mono-bilingual dictionary, which is weighted heavily towards the target language, might be a new concept for university level students, however. Most dictionaries of this kind are designed for English language learners, but they were not mentioned by any of the English language lecturers who contacted me, many of whom concentrated on monolingual dictionary use because they taught multilingual groups in an English-speaking environment.

Some course outlines referred to the use of thesauruses, and one informant teaching on a foundation course in English for overseas students made particular use of the LONGMAN ESSENTIAL ACTIVATOR (Willis 1998). Both the LONGMAN ESSENTIAL ACTIVATOR and the *dictionnaires analogiques* mentioned by Wise (1997:20) group words and phrases in semantic areas under alphabetically organized key concepts.

Non-alphabetical photo dictionaries and picture dictionaries were not mentioned in the literature or by any informants (although featured in the lists of dictionaries provided by the CELTE Self-Access Centre). In order to consult dictionaries of this type learners need to understand their structure, interpret thematic headings, and predict subordinate lexical sets (Nesi 1989).

The skill of identifying and using cross-references was covered by only 20% of the dictionary workbooks examined by Stark (1990). Berwick & Horsfall (1996:11) draw attention to the cross-referencing skill of checking a word in both parts of a bilingual dictionary, and/or proceeding from a bilingual to a monolingual dictionary, but these kind of skills were not mentioned explicitly by my informants.

Electronic dictionaries on CD-ROM often have a complex hypertextual macrostructure, and each one is organized differently, so even expert dictionary users need to learn how to access information in a new product. Users without prior experience of hypertext may need particular support (Nesi 1996, 1999). English learners' dictionaries such as ALD and COBUILD on CD-ROM are often available for self-access use by EAP pre-sessional and in-sessional students, and two informants reported using the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE as part of a dictionary skills training course. A simple search skill taught on one of these courses was the use of the wildcard (or *joker*) to substitute for one or more letters of the

search term. This course also included 'tasks such as finding synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms'. As Guillot & Kenning (1994:65) point out, early versions of the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE do not offer the complex search options available to users of English learners' dictionaries on CD-ROM. The particular additional and alternative skills required to master the macrostructure of more complex electronic dictionaries were not specified in the literature, however, or by any informants.

2.4 Stage four: Interpreting entry information

As a first step in interpreting entry information, learners must be able to distinguish the various component parts of the entry. Several informants referred to exercises to practise this, and two English language textbooks used by informants (O'Brien & Jordan 1985 and Soars & Soars 1989) examine the organisation of the dictionary entry in detail. The skill seems to be associated with the teaching of low-level students, or students who have not been taught dictionary skills prior to university study, as is often the case with speakers of English as a second language who have acquired their language knowledge informally.

Checking spelling in the dictionary is a common but relatively simple look-up activity, which does not require the user to interpret the dictionary entry in any detail. It is necessary when only part of word form is known, or when information is required about inflected forms, hyphenation, or capitalization. Stark (1990) notes that in dictionary workbooks 'many aspects of spelling are under-represented', but O'Brien & Jordan (1985) contain a section on 'using the dictionary to help you spell', and the self-access tasks for use with the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE which were sent by one informant contained activities for checking spelling (made even simpler in electronic dictionaries because of the wildcard or *joker* facility). One (EAP) informant included discussion of the use of computerized spell-checkers in a Study Skills course outline. The dangers of over-reliance on this type of 'dictionary' information are obvious, yet spell-checker use was not mentioned as a dictionary skill topic by other informants, or in the literature.

Many informants mentioned that they used the dictionary front matter or companion workbooks to train their students in dictionary skills. The use of typographic conventions, numbered superscripts and symbols are usually explained in documents of this type rather than in independent coursebooks, because they vary from dictionary to dictionary. Barnard (1989) refers to codes and superscripts, and O'Brien & Jordan (1985) explain the function of some codes and punctuation marks with reference to the (OXFORD) ALD. They also draw learners' attention to the role of different typefaces (for example 'the headword ... is printed in very black ink'). This kind of information may be particularly important for users who are not familiar with the conventions of the Roman alphabet, and who find it difficult to distinguish variations in font.

Stark (1990:199) found that 54.3% of workbooks mentioned pronunciation information, but 'learners are seldom instructed in depth as to how they should approach [IPA] symbols'. Although most EAP textbooks ignore the International Phonetic Alphabet, O'Brien & Jordan (1985) examines IPA and stress patterns in some detail. Soars and Soars (1989), another textbook mentioned by informants, also contains exercises to practise interpreting IPA. The introductory section of the interactive CD-ROM developed by Epps (forthcoming) consists of a tutorial on the IPA information contained in dictionaries.

For several informants training in IPA was a top priority. One informant described a course of six lectures in basic phonetics which constituted the only dictionary skills training provided for a group of near-fluent advanced ESP learners. Another informant sent me an outline for an undergraduate language and linguistics course which described different transcription systems including IPA, and considered the relationship between

citation forms and the pronunciation of connected speech - an aspect of dictionary skills training that was not mentioned by other informants.

According to Stark (1990), dictionary workbooks pay very little attention to etymological information. Indeed, Stark himself was wary of the danger of giving learners the historical meaning of words, because it may differ from their current meaning. Monolingual English learners' dictionaries do not provide etymological information, and published materials for the training of EFL/EAP/ESP students almost entirely ignore this aspect of dictionary use. Many of the tasks in Wise (1997), however, involve study of the origin and development of French words. Papers by Ilson (1983) and Pierson (1989) argue that etymology can be a very useful tool in the language classroom. Pierson describes how he required Hong Kong university students in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences to use etymological or large collegiate dictionaries in order to examine the origins of technical terms, and make connections between words which have the same origin. Pierson also advocates that Chinese language learners should study the history of the Chinese written characters.

A similar approach to Pierson's was adopted by one of my informants, who required second year English Language Studies students to consult dictionaries while studying 'abstraction and technicality in academic discourse'. This included a workshop on Greek and Latin influences on technicality, where 'students are introduced to the etymological listings in dictionaries, the abbreviations etc.'. Another informant included etymology in a course outline for language and linguistics students, and I was sent self-access materials for use with the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE which contained questions about *étymologie*.

Although the interpretation of etymological information might appear to be an advanced skill, only to be included in courses for serious linguists, Pierson's experience with ESP students in Hong Kong suggests that it may be relevant to a broader range of learners. The dictionary skills specifications for the National Literacy Strategy even require children in the upper primary school (year 6) to be familiar with the function and use of etymological dictionaries.

Grammar and syntax information is usually explained in the dictionary front matter and/or in companion workbooks which a number of informants said they used to train their students in dictionary skills. Coursebooks used by informants (O'Brien & Jordan 1985, Soars & Soars 1989, Nott 1993 and 1998) included exercises to practise the transitivity information in dictionaries, and teaching materials and course outlines sent to me also variously mentioned the interpretation of dictionary information concerning countability, gender, conjugation, irregular verbs, reflexive verbs and verb complementation patterns. Berwick & Horsfall (1996:7), however, writing primarily for secondary school teachers, downplay the need to understand the more difficult grammar coding:

Most abbreviations regarding parts of speech are straightforward. More complex ones, such as vt and vi, probably need not be explained - all most pupils need to know is that the word is a verb.

A companion skill to that of recognising the component parts of a dictionary entry is that of distinguishing between what is relevant and what is irrelevant to a given consultation. This may involve identifying the appropriate sense in a polysemous entry, and sifting information in a long definition to find key words. If users do this badly they may mistakenly believe that the dictionary consultation has been satisfactory, and misapply the information they have gathered. Mitchell (1983) and Miller & Gildea (1984) both found that primary school age children tended to avoid reading the whole dictionary entry, and picked out just one familiar-looking part of the definition instead. This resulted in some amusing but potentially disastrous errors in the children's own language production. Tono 1984 (cited in Béjoint 1994), Müllich (1990) and Nesi & Meara (1994)

found the same 'negative choice strategy' in university students, who often misread dictionary entries because they did not select information appropriately. Barnard (1989) points out that it may be necessary for the user to search a long way down a dictionary entry to find the meaning that he or she requires.

Many of the tasks set by informants required students to discover one correct answer by sifting through a complex entry, although this skill was not explicitly stated. The NEAB University Entrance Test in English for Speakers of Other Languages (UETESOL), which is taken by many students on university foundation courses in Britain, also sometimes tests this skill in the editing section of the written paper by requiring candidates to match a word in context with one of several meanings in a given dictionary entry.

Tasks to find one correct answer in a dictionary or collection of reference books also involve interpreting definitions. Some informants indicated that this kind of task was the only type of dictionary skills training students received. Such tasks, however, do require students to apply many skills, especially if the look-up items are culturally loaded, as some informants reported. The look-up items they mentioned included faux amis, popular expressions, idioms and phrases, sometimes necessitating the consultation of more than one dictionary, or a dictionary and an encyclopedia. Wise (1997) suggests tasks to interpret turns of phrase and advertising slogans, and to investigate the origins of idiomatic expressions.

According to Stark (1990:200), many workbooks include references to style labels, but do not mention their limitations. Soars and Soars (1989) teach the meaning of geographical and register labels, but Wise (1997:199) invites more sophisticated comparative examination of labelling, addressing some of the issues that the workbooks in Stark's survey failed to cover.

Stark (1990:200) found only 22.9% coverage of collocation in dictionary workbooks, and few EAP textbooks mention it. Barnard (1989:17), however, suggests an activity to compare the collocates of intensifiers in Japanese and English, and Wise (1997:24) sets projects to compare English and French collocational restrictions. Collocations were mentioned in one or two course descriptions, particularly in connection with the extraction of information from dictionary examples. Barnard (1989) attaches great importance to collocational information in the dictionary, and claims that 'the learner who is satisfied with knowing at a level below the collocation is probably not learning effectively because he is not regarding the language as an interconnected system'. He draws attention, however, to the difficulty of interpreting examples correctly.

Because examples are the least abstract way of giving information, they are also the least explicit. The user has to infer the usage or grammatical "rule" from an example of realistic language.The danger is that an inexperienced or unskilful user of the dictionary may have no idea of what grammatical information is conveyed in an entry.... (1989:15)

One outline that was sent me for a language and linguistics course included 'examples of usage: their function and how to select good ones', and another informant specified the skill of knowing 'how to adapt examples', including a consideration of whether the example is given 'as an illustration, or as an exception'. Such a skill would involve recognition of collocational information in the dictionary, and possibly also the understanding that collocational information is not always clearly signalled.

None of my informants made particular reference to information in dictionaries listed independently of the main A-Z listing, such as usage notes, study pages, pictures, numerals, proper names, kinship terms and place names, although Stark (1990:199) notes that dictionary workbook authors 'often appear keen to advertize information contained in dictionary front matter and appendices'. O'Brien & Jordan (1985:18) briefly

list the kinds of information that appear in dictionary appendices. Some electronic English dictionaries for learners such as the LONGMAN INTERACTIVE DICTIONARY and COBUILD on CD-ROM are actually compilations of several different sources, and provide an abundance of information in addition to the A-Z entries (Nesi 1996, 1999). English language teaching textbooks do not yet refer to these innovatory reference works, however, and none of my English language teaching informants mentioned them.

After look-up information has been identified and understood, it needs to be adapted to a particular writing context, or checked against a particular reading context. Berwick & Horsfall (1996:10) specify this skill, as do Gethin & Gunnemark (1996:106). The 1997/1998 syllabus of the NEAB University Entrance Test in English for Speakers of Other Languages (UETESOL) mentions the process of verifying dictionary information in the 'Editing Skills' section of the written paper:

candidates may be asked to match dictionary definitions with the use of items in a text. They will be required to provide the form of the word which conforms precisely to the grammatical constraints of the context.

Again, the process of checking dictionary information against the text was not specified by my informants, although the closely related skill of contextual guessing prior to look up was referred to.

2.5 Stage five: Locating entry information

The final stage in the look-up process is that of recording dictionary information. Berwick & Horsfall (1996:25) regard this stage as essential, and Barnard (1989:17) also considers it to be an important skill, although not one that need always follow look-up. Rare words might not be worth writing down, but a learner might make a mental note of some words, mark up translations of others in the text (a method Barnard does not recommend), and use a vocabulary notebook to keep a permanent record of the dictionary information deemed most important.

'Sifting' entry information involves deciding which information to record in a notebook, and which to discard. Berwick & Horsfall (1996:26) also point out that the compiler must decide on the format, the organizational system, whether to record word information in the first or the foreign language, and whether to use abbreviations. Barnard (1989:17) suggests that a vocabulary notebook entry should contain 'usable chunks of language', accompanied by citation forms and a systematic coding system.

Bishop (1998) found that 19 out of the 25 second level Open University students of French in his survey kept a vocabulary notebook for recording dictionary look-up information. Leeke & Shaw's findings (forthcoming) suggest that vocabulary notebook keeping is most widespread amongst beginner language learners, but they also cite a number of examples of wordlist-making amongst overseas students studying at a British university. They found that for these students vocabulary storage was a highly personal process: 'nearly every list had individual features and revealed individual histories and beliefs'. Leeke & Shaw review the psycholinguistic and applied linguistic literature on vocabulary storage techniques for language learners, but take a pragmatic approach to the teaching of these skills. They argue that a less-than-optimal technique that suits and is practised by an individual learner is much more effective than 'ideal precepts which are never followed'.

Few informants specified the recording of dictionary information as a skill they taught to language students. One referred, however, to his attempt to make EAP preessional students keep card files of words they looked up. The system was apparently unpopular with both tutors and students, and was subsequently abandoned. Some electronic dictionaries provide notebook space where users can create their own personal

collections of dictionary information by 'pasting' entries. No informants mentioned this facility, however.

2.6 Stage six: Understanding lexicographical issues

Some of the courses described in published papers or by informants include discussion of lexicographical issues, designed to help learners select dictionaries and/or relevant dictionary information, or linked to practical lexicographical projects.

One informant provided the outline of a fairly theoretical course for Language and Linguistics students. It introduced some lexicographical terminology in 'a comparison of the everyday vocabulary that we use to talk about words with the technical vocabulary used by lexicographers and linguists', and also reviewed general principles of dictionary compilation, and examined 'types of definition: analytic, synthetic, synonym, rule-based etc.'. Another informant reported that he had invited representatives from a local publisher to talk to students 'about how dictionaries are made and what they can and can't offer the users'.

Whitfield (1993), on the other hand, describes a scheme to teach schoolchildren dictionary skills which required the children to create their own multilingual dictionary. The children learnt about the function and use of dictionaries by addressing the problems they themselves encountered with translations, definitions and register restrictions. The dictionary skills specifications in the National Literacy Strategy also require young learners to compile their own dictionaries, and to experiment in the process with different organizational systems and different defining styles.

None of my informants specified lexicographical projects as part of their dictionary skills training programmes, but several included the comparison of different defining styles, and the comparison of entries for the same word in different dictionaries (for example the COLLINS 'Gem' and a larger Collins dictionary). Gethin & Gunnemark (1996) also look at what they consider to be 'good' and 'bad' dictionary entries, and Barnard (1989:25) suggests an activity to compare entry information in ALD and LDOCE.

One informant supplied details of an assignment for an undergraduate Study Skills module which required students to reflect on many aspects of dictionary content and use. The students had to describe their own dictionary use and associated problems, compare entry information in at least two different types of dictionary, and introspect about how much they had learnt from the process of consultation. This assignment was part of an accredited university course, a rare case of dictionary skills not only being taught, but also examined.

Several informants acknowledged the need to promote understanding of the use of dictionaries in different contexts. Berwick & Horsfall (1996:18) recommend that teachers should involve learners in discussion of 'real-life situations in which language use requires instantly available knowledge'. One of my informants did just this with her students, 'sharing information about which dictionaries they use, and what they use them for', while another specified 'Who uses dictionaries and for what?' as the title of a course unit.

Dictionary criticism and evaluation is perhaps the most complex skill in dictionary skills training, because it presupposes more basic skills of choosing, interpreting and comparing dictionary information. At this level students might discuss myths about the authority of the dictionary, and the impossibility of defining and translating meaning perfectly. Stark (1990:202) points out that 'for understandable commercial reasons' dictionary workbooks downplay defects in dictionaries. One course description sent to me by an informant, however, promised to 'stress that dictionaries are written by human beings and reflect their strengths and weaknesses'.

Stark also comments on the lack of warning in dictionary workbooks regarding 'the dangers of assuming 1:1 equivalents between languages'. Gethin & Gunnemark (1996) however, encourage a critical approach, considering the advantages and disadvantages of bilingual versus monolingual dictionaries (and deciding in favour of the bilingual). Barnard's notes on dictionary training (1989:25) warn against 'believing that words have exact, unique or unvarying translations', and one informant described a dictionary course for first year undergraduates which considered 'the concept of the untranslatable'. Another informant described a bilingual dictionary skills training programme 'including comparisons with the English section of the dictionary, to highlight (often subtle) differences between the two languages'.

Students studying Applied Linguistics at postgraduate level may be set tasks which require sophisticated lexicographical knowledge and critical insight. An assignment for the Grammar module of the Warwick MA in English Language Teaching this year required students to assess the consistency and thoroughness of the grammatical information for given words in a specified learner's dictionary, while a Use of English module in the same programme included a discussion of approaches to critical discourse analysis, referring to two articles which treat dictionary entries as discourse types (Hoey 1996 and Krishnamurthy 1996).

3. Attitudes and beliefs relating to the teaching of dictionary skills

Four major themes emerged from discussion with informants.

3.1 Students enter university with poor dictionary skills

Many informants believed that their students had not received much dictionary skills instruction prior to tertiary level. Typical comments were: 'I am always surprised how little training in this students have had at A level', '97% of students have no skills', and 'students don't in general ever use monolingual dictionaries. They use bilingual ones badly'.

One informant commented that 'the changes to English language teaching in secondary schools have had a cataclysmic effect on the teaching of modern languages at university'. Another wondered whether dictionary skills knowledge had declined amongst UK students in the past ten years. Two informants were sure that it had:

Dictionaries are books, and students are increasingly reluctant to open books. At one time we could rely on students to consult verb tables in the Collins Robert, but they are no longer able to do so (they have no idea why numbers appear after verbs, and the explanation of (vi) and (vt/vtr) would have been unnecessary a decade ago).

There was also some suggestion that dictionary skills training might fall between two stools. One informant pointed out that while foreign-language teachers assumed that dictionary skills had been covered by first language teachers, first-language teachers were in fact 'working to a different agenda entirely' - 'the school system assumes that skills are transferable and self-evident, but more often than not students assume they are isolated'. Not all informants were conscious of falling standards, however. Dictionary skills training was not given at one informant's (non-UK) institution because 'we all recommend dictionaries, but students are expected to already know how to use them'.

3.2 There is insufficient dictionary skills training at university level

Most of my informants reported dictionary skills training on preessional courses, in first year programmes, or in an isolated series of lectures, rather than as regular input

throughout a student's university life. Only two informants reported providing introductions to dictionaries on courses at all levels with 'progression over the years'.

There was also some suggestion that the dictionary skills component was getting squeezed out of language courses, sometimes as a result of course re-organization. One informant commented that 'much more time needs to be devoted to the development of dictionary skills, but of course modularization does not allow for it', and another admitted 'There is no doubt a lot of room for improvement of these skills. Unfortunately, we are always short of time to fit all these skills into our teaching'. A lecturer in Japanese made a similar point: 'at the elementary level there is little incentive to use dictionaries, as time is limited'. Although tutors on a distance learning degree programme were 'urged to mention these skills and to encourage students to adopt strategies', it was also pointed out that 'they have 21 hours of group tuition per year, which is not a lot!'. In some cases dictionary skills training was reduced to make room for other subjects. One informant sent me the outline for a course entitled An Introduction to Dictionaries, which has now been replaced by a Corpus Linguistics course.

Several informants expressed dissatisfaction with current practice. Typical comments were:

I think we could try to do more.

We are aware of this as an area that would repay time invested, but as yet have only taken hesitant steps by looking a little at dictionary use.

I am conscious that we need to build up a better bank of reference books.

The exercises are not very inspired.

We do a little bit ... with our first years and then with our third years... but far from enough.

We have been aware of a while that [dictionary skills] might be formalized somehow, always assuming that there is a non-boring way of doing it!

3.3 Some dictionary training tasks are unpopular with staff and students

Several informants noted that dictionary skills training was not 'sexy' and that students and tutors found it boring. Not many people showed up to a talk by representatives from a local dictionary publisher, arranged by one of my informants: 'perhaps we should not have been surprised that out of a potential 200 students about a dozen turned up. The same lack of interest, I am sorry to say, prevailed among the staff'. Another informant described a failed attempt to include dictionary skills exercises and a system of vocabulary record keeping in an EAP preessional course: 'the students were bored and the teachers hated it, so I gave up'.

There were reports, however, of enthusiastic responses to dictionary skills training. Most of these involved electronic dictionary use. Guillot & Kenning (1994) write of students' 'very tangible enthusiasm' when using the ROBERT ÉLECTRONIQUE, and an informant said he was pleased with the response to self-access material for use with this dictionary: 'as it's all computer-based, it goes down quite well'. A pronunciation course involving both CD-ROM and print based activities was reported as a great success: 'far from being unpopular, the students really enjoy this quite detailed research task, the discoveries they make, and the feeling that, with a dictionary close by, they do not need to have previously heard a new, or "difficult" word before being able to pronounce it'.

Interest in the new electronic medium may not be the only explanation for the success of these programmes. There is some suggestion that tasks demanding critical and evaluative skills are more popular with students than mere mechanical exercises. Whitfield (1993) writes of transforming a boring and unpopular dictionary skills training programme by setting young learners the task of writing their own bilingual dictionaries, and although there may be no time for such ambitious projects in university-level courses, one informant wrote of practising 'dictionary use of an intelligent kind', and another was proud that the students in his department 'don't do hunt the thimble type exercises'. The justification for this approach is perhaps summed up by an informant who wrote: 'If we perceive dictionaries as tools to fill in basic gaps in the language they may be perceived as "laziness inducing" or counter-productive. But the minute you start thinking in terms of higher skills and critical thought, they are both interesting and useful'.

3.4 The teaching of dictionary skills was believed to be important

My informants were self-selecting, so it is perhaps hardly surprising that many of them considered dictionary skills training 'essential'. One informant said 'I would have thought that's something any language teacher worth her/his salt would do'. Three informants also emphasized the importance of good dictionary skills when studying at a distance: 'we consider they are essential for any learner, but even more so for the distance learner'.

Most informants said that they would like to read this report when it was completed, and expressed a desire to improve the provision of dictionary skills training in their institutions. I was impressed by the enthusiasm and dedication of these busy people, who took the trouble to respond to my requests, and had so many ideas and suggestions.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Hélène Adam (UMIST); Rodney Ball (University of Southampton); David Banks (Université de Bretagne Occidentale); Christopher Barnard (Teikyo University); Polina Belimova (Institute of Foreign Languages, St Petersburg); Graham Bishop (Open University); Jonathan Bunt (University of Manchester); Andrew Cath (Universiti Brunei Darussalam); Tim Connell (City University, London); Rosalind Epps (University of New England, New South Wales); Alan Evison (Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London); Jeanne Godfrey (University of Westminster); Richard Hail (Oxford Brookes University); Peter Hasler (University of Glasgow); Annegret Jamieson (University of Hull); Steve Lamb (University of Warwick); Beverly Lewin (Tel Aviv University); Hélène Lewis (University of Bournemouth); Jo McDonough (University of Essex); Pat Mines (University of Wales, Aberystwyth); Jennifer Moore-Blunt (University of Portsmouth); Hélène Mulphin (The Open University); David Nott (University of Lancaster); Martin O'Shaughnessy (Nottingham Trent University); Loredana Polezzi (University of Warwick); Rod Revell (University of Warwick); Peter Robinson (University of Kent); Li Ruru (University of Leeds); Raphael Salkie (University of Brighton); Jane Shelton (University of Newcastle); Philip Shaw (Århus School of Business); Elizabeth Thomson (University of Wollongong); Richard Wakely (University of Edinburgh); Penny Willis (University of Hull); Hilary Wise (Queen Mary and Westfield College, University of London).