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# Dictionary skills in advanced learners' coursebooks — Materials survey

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## Abstract

Nowadays, almost 65 years after the publication of the first advanced learner's dictionary, this particular consultation source is considered “a useful addition to any [language] course” (Sharma & Barret, 2007: 52). However, as it was remarked by Leany (2007: 1), the ability to successfully utilize advanced learner's dictionaries requires a considerable amount of practice on the part of students. Thus, dictionary skills appear to constitute one of the key aspects of EFL education.

Therefore, the aim of this article is to identify key dictionary skills and describe how they are promoted in advanced learner's coursebooks. Following the set of guidelines described in Leany (2007) and Welker (2010), the authors developed criteria that were used to assess the dictionary-oriented contents of selected teaching materials. It is hoped that this article highlights the advantages and exposes the shortcomings of dictionary-oriented materials and activities included in EFL coursebooks.

Keywords: EFL, monolingual dictionaries, learner dictionaries, advanced learners, educational materials

Some abbreviations used in this article

LDOCE — Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English — <http://www.ldoceonline.com>

MED — Macmillan English Dictionary — <http://www.macmillandictionary.com>

CALD — Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary — <http://dictionary.cambridge.org>

OALD — Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary — <http://oald8.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com>

CCAD — Collins Cobuild Advanced Dictionary — <http://www.myco-build.com>

### Development of advanced learner's dictionaries

*Advanced learner's dictionaries* (ALDs) date back to the 1940s<sup>1</sup> when the first consultation source of this type (Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary) was created by A. S. Hornby (*The Man Who Made Dictionaries*). His aim was to publish a monolingual dictionary for students, as opposed to consultation sources for native speakers that were available at the time. Thus, he created what came to be known as the first ALD<sup>2</sup>. Its basic features included simplified definitions and information concerning collocations and word usage.

The next milestone in the development of *advanced learner's dictionaries* was connected with the advent of corpus linguistics. Computer-generated word frequency lists made it possible for the lexicographers to revise information provided in the previous editions, e.g. to rearrange the order of the entries for a given lexical item, basing on the frequency of usage of a given word sense in the language. The first corpus-based ALD was Cobuild Advanced Dictionary (History of Cobuild), published in 1987 and based on John Sinclair's electronic corpus which was compiled in 1980 (John Sinclair). Other publishing houses soon adapted the same approach and, nowadays, corpora-derived examples constitute a vital component of all ALDs, and some consultation sources (e.g. LDOCE) offer corpus-based example banks.

The next major change was the publication of the first electronic ALD. Owing to digital technologies, the amount of information students could

1 Created by A. S. Hornby, was the first learner dictionary.

2 ALDs are sometimes referred to as MLDs (Monolingual Learner Dictionaries). This name, however, can be misleading, as it also refers to a simplified ALDs that are being offered by most publishing houses (e.g. Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary vs Cambridge Learner's Dictionary).

find about a given lexical item increased considerably. Nowadays, a CD/DVD with a dictionary can provide the learners with:

- British and North American recordings of a given word or sentence
- sound effects and animations used to explain the meaning of certain lexical items
- quick access to synonyms (as opposed to printed thesauri that need to be obtained separately)
- wildcard-based word search (useful in the case of word-formation tasks)
- sound-based word search (helpful for students who have heard a word, but do not know the spelling)

In addition to the features that can be accessed solely by means of computer software, the large amount of storage space available makes it possible for lexicographers to include more information about each word (e.g. etymology, additional examples, more illustrations, etc.). These could, theoretically, be included in print versions, but it would make them considerably longer and might have a negative impact on the ease of information retrieval.

Moreover, all major publishing houses encourage learners to purchase ALDs by providing additional resources, such as interactive lexical and grammatical exercises, tools to record and listen to one's own pronunciation, interactive writing guides, printable worksheets, customizable word lists, etc. Considering all these features, one might come to the conclusion that ALDs evolved from relatively simple consultation sources into interactive language-learning workstations where students can perfect their skills, broaden their knowledge and find in-depth information about a given word.

On the other hand, there seems to be relatively little room for improvement in the case of printed versions of ALDs. The publishing houses seem to share this point of view and some of them (e.g. MacMillan Publishing Ltd.) have already decided to discontinue printed versions of their dictionaries (*Stop the Press*). It seems relatively probable that in the nearest future the term *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* will refer chiefly to a sub-category of *Electronic Dictionaries* (EDs).

The process of digitization of printed consultation sources made it possible to publish resources from ALDs online. Using web-based versions of

ALDs is free of charge, but their functionality is limited, and they can be considered to be “demo” versions of the EDs. However, since each of the five aforementioned major publishing houses decided to remove different features from their electronic dictionary before publishing it online, it is still possible to gain access to major features of any commercial ALD, by consolidating pieces of information from different sources. For instance, if a student wants to find information about synonyms, they should refer to MED, while picture sets (e.g. pictures presenting different types of trains) can only be found in OALD (Molenda, 2012: 163).

Moreover, the online ALDs have two main advantages over their electronic counterparts — firstly, they are regularly updated for the latest words (Molenda, 2012: 164), which is not yet possible in the case of the ED’s (one has to purchase a new edition); secondly, they feature different extras provided by the publishers. These additional pieces of information are best exemplified in the case of word frequency:

- MED marks the 7500 most commonly used English words with stars (from one star — for the least frequently used items — to three stars, in the case of the most common words);
- in LDOCE spoken and written word frequencies are contrasted (3000 most frequently used spoken vs. written items), which helps students decide how to use given words during production tasks;
- OALD marks 3000 most popular English words (*Oxford 3000* list) and it also provides the *Academic Word List* which “is a list of words that you are likely to meet if you study at an English-speaking university” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*).

To the best of the authors’ knowledge, no single fully-functional, commercial electronic dictionary in question contains as much information about word frequency as can be derived from the three sources described (as of January 2013).

In conclusion, the ongoing development of the ALDs — both in terms of their informativeness and availability seems to have increased their potential of being “a useful addition to any [language] course” (Sharma & Barret, 2007: 52). However, the fact that the ALDs are becoming more informative might result in their increasing complexity. Thus, the number of skills that

need to be mastered in order to successfully utilize these sources seems to be growing. In order to better understand the potential challenges and/or problems that one might encounter in the process of a dictionary consultation, let us explore the classification of *dictionary skills* (*reference skills*).

### Dictionary skills

Firstly, it needs to be noted that the aforementioned notions of *dictionary skills* and *reference skills* are not synonymous — the latter one being a potentially broader category that might refer to other sources available (e.g. Google browser)<sup>3</sup>. However, since *dictionary skills* seem to constitute a sub-category of *reference skills*, the two concepts are used interchangeably in this article.

Secondly, one should be aware of the fact that the classification presented in this section is by no means the only possible way of classifying *reference skills*. Its aim is rather to reflect the needs of one particular group (advanced students), as well as the requirements that ought to be met in order to successfully derive various kinds of information from the electronic ALDs. Thus, the list presented in Table 1 differs from its original version proposed by Nesi (1999). However, it was decided to maintain the division of skills that corresponds to the consecutive stages of a dictionary consultation.

<b>Stage</b>	<b>Reference skills</b>
Stage One: Before Study	Knowing which dictionaries exist
	Knowing what kind of information can be found in dictionaries
Stage Two: Before Dictionary Consultation	Deciding whether consultation is necessary
	Deciding what to look up
	Deciding which dictionary is most likely to satisfy the purpose of consultation
	Deciding on the form of the look-up item
Stage Three: Locating Entry Information	Understanding the structure of the dictionary
	Finding multi-word units
	Understanding the hyperlinks, searching for a word within an entry

3 Google browser was described as a legitimate reference resource by Boulton (2012).

Stage Four: Interpreting Entry Information	Distinguishing between the components of the entry
	Finding information about spelling
	Understanding symbols, labels, abbreviations, conventions
	Interpreting IPA and pronunciation information
	Interpreting information concerning word usage (restrictive labels)
	Interpreting information concerning word frequency
	Interpreting the definition
	Interpreting information about collocations/deriving information from examples
	Interpreting the C/U, T/I labels and their relation to the meaning
	Deriving information from picture sets
	Deriving information from thesauri, word clouds, etc.
	Finding word families
	Finding information about dictionary use

Table 1.  
Dictionary skills.

As can be induced from Table 1, dictionary skills encompass many various steps taken by learners whenever they consult a dictionary. These steps embrace actions happening before, during and after using a dictionary, thus the table provides a fairly extensive list of dictionary skills that are necessary in order to make the process of dictionary use as effective as possible.

#### Teaching dictionary skills

Since the list presented in the previous section is fairly extensive, one needs to ask a vital question, namely the one of whether these skills should be taught. This question can be divided into two sub-questions that can be summarized as follows:

1. Is there a need to teach *reference skills*?
2. Is it possible to teach them?

The answers to these questions are by no means definite, since one needs to take into account multiple factors that can affect students' *reference skills* and their potential acquisition.

For instance, one might provide a negative answer to the first question, claiming that the young students of English who have been using computers since their childhood, are “digital natives” (Sharma & Barret, 2007: 11), and their skills as regards finding information online are naturally well-developed. Thus, they should have few problems using the ALDs available online free of charge.

On the other hand, there exist some indications that even the members of this “technology-savvy” group might lack the knowledge that would allow them to successfully utilize the online ALDs. For instance, a study by Molenda (2012) shows that in Polish educational context young advanced learners of English seem to prefer the easily-accessible, though less informative online bilingual dictionaries. Moreover, one needs to take into account the fact that, most likely, not all advanced students feel confident using technology.

However, even if this is the case that the online versions of the Advanced Learner's Dictionaries are underused, it does not necessarily indicate that students lack *reference skills* as such. Thus, another problem that needs to be solved is the one of describing advanced learners' *dictionary skills*. Unfortunately, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no large-scale study concerning this topic has been recently conducted (as of 2010)<sup>4</sup>.

While there seems to have been little holistic research on students' *reference skills*, one might focus on the studies that describe the use of particular strategies. For instance, Welker (2010) mentions one study of this kind, whose main finding was the fact that “Polish learners have serious problems understanding dictionary labels” (Głowacka, 2001; cited in: Dziemianko & Lew, 2006). Another one, conducted by the co-author of this article (Molenda, 2012), suggests that advanced learners' knowledge of the online ALDs is rarely systematic and satisfactory (the study focused primarily on the skills listed in *Stage One* — cf. Table 1).

4 Although in the article we refer chiefly to Polish educational context, we found no examples of such studies conducted in other countries.

The aforementioned results indicate that there might exist certain deficiencies in advanced learners' knowledge of the essential *dictionary skills*. Due to the scarcity of research available, this statement still remains largely unproven, however, there exists another group of studies that might support this point of view. These studies focus on the amount of teaching that is devoted to the ALDs. For instance, Szymańska (2001; cited in: Dziemianko & Lew, 2006) claims that "teacher questionnaires reveal that the majority of teachers do not normally train their students in dictionary use." In the aforementioned study (Molenda, 2012), 12% of advanced students pointed to the state school as a source of knowledge about any dictionaries<sup>5</sup>.

The results of the studies described in the previous paragraphs indicate that the answer to the first question posed at the beginning of this section is positive. However, while there seems to exist a need to teach *reference skills*, the question of whether they can actually be effectively taught in a language classroom, remains a major issue.

Interestingly, Lew and Galas (2008) conducted research whose aim was to provide an answer to the question of whether or not reference skills should be taught. Their results indicate that "reference skills can be taught effectively in a language classroom", even at the levels which are lower than the linguistic level of the users of ALDs. Moreover, in the case of 4 out of 13 dictionary skills described by them (*the use of C/U labels, interpreting phonetic symbols, finding pronouns and collocations, and interpreting restrictive labels*), the results of *reference skills*-based post-test were at least twice as good as the results of the pretest (Lew and Galas, 2008: 1278)<sup>6</sup>.

Thus, the answer to the original question, posed at the beginning of this section, seems to be positive. However, though dictionary skills should be taught, some of the previously mentioned results seem to indicate that they are, to a large extent, neglected in the language classroom. Explaining the possible reasons responsible for this phenomenon was the basic premise of this study.

5 22% of respondents stated that dictionaries were mentioned during classes in private language schools. Since multiple answers to this question were possible, one should not add this number to the aforementioned 12%.

6 Lew & Galas cite a number of other studies whose results are similar to theirs, but none of them was conducted in the Polish educational context.



## Research questions

In our research we decided to focus on teaching materials, rather than other constituents of the Polish educational system. Among the other reasons to adopt this approach, the first and most important one is the fact that the other major option — focusing on teachers — may reveal their convictions and opinions, but might fail to provide definite answers concerning the information that the teacher is obliged to convey to the students. While some teachers might be more dedicated to the idea of teaching *reference skills* than others, the phenomenon in question is the “core” set of topics that any teacher, regardless of their beliefs, is supposed to cover in class.

In the Polish educational context FL teachers are usually asked to choose one of the syllabi that accompany specific textbooks and, then, conduct classes on the basis of the materials provided in them. Thus, the contents of student’s books determine the contents of the syllabi. This practice is, also, not unheard of in the case of language schools. However, since these institutions are free to create regulations concerning teaching syllabi, it cannot be stated with absolute certainty that the majority of them adopted this way of using textbooks.

Finally, students might consult their textbooks whenever they need to find information about some aspects of language; for instance, they might refer to a short grammatical section, which is placed typically at the end of the book. Thus, the student’s books apart from reflecting the “core” contents of the course, may also contain some additional pieces of information or skills-based sections that students might use on their own, should the need arise.

Taking into account these characteristics of the EFL textbooks, two major research questions were posed:

1. Are *reference skills* present in student’s books?
2. Are they given enough attention? Are there any *dictionary skills* which seem to be under-/over-represented?

## Objects

Since the ALDs are intended to be used chiefly by advanced learners of English, it was decided that materials surveyed should represent the C1 and C2 CEFR (*Common European Framework of Reference*) level. This criterion

was met by all 13 books examined, 10 of which were available on the Polish market in 2012. Although the study does not cover all the materials available, our goal was to include at least one book from each major publishing house that sells educational resources in Poland (i.e., *Macmillan*, *Oxford*, *Longman*, *Cambridge*, *Express Publishing*). The abbreviated list of research objects is presented in the preceding sections, while the comprehensive list of the books can be found in the *Appendices* section.

## Procedure

Materials in the advanced student's books might necessitate spontaneous productive as well as receptive use of dictionaries (e.g. exercises featuring collocations, authentic materials, etc.). However, in such a case no attention is explicitly paid to the consultation sources and, thus, any potential dictionary consultation depends chiefly on the learner's decision. Therefore, it was decided that these activities are not within the scope of interest of this study. On the contrary, we focused on the exercises that made explicit references to consultation sources and aimed at developing and practising dictionary skills.

Each book was surveyed for materials that met the aforementioned criteria. Each time a dictionary-oriented exercise/material was encountered, it was evaluated for the number<sup>7</sup> of *reference skills* that it addressed. While this approach made it possible to determine how many times each skill was mentioned, it was also decided to calculate the number of exercises in each book. It was hoped that these numbers would provide an insight into the distribution of dictionary-oriented exercises across various sources.

## Results

Table 2 presents the aforementioned list of dictionary skills, adapted from Nesi (1999), with the skills divided into four consecutive stages of dictionary consultation. The numbers represent tokens — each token being a single instance where a given skill was targeted by an exercise/other teaching material. Thus, the total number of tokens exceeds the number of actual exercises in the student's books.

7 While the minimum number was one, certain exercises targeted multiple skills.

<b>Stage one: before study</b>	Knowing which dictionaries exist	1
	Knowing what kinds of information are found in dictionaries/other sources	1
<b>Stage two: before dictionary consultation</b>	Deciding whether consultation is necessary	1
	Deciding what to look up	0
	Deciding which dictionary is most likely to satisfy the purpose of consultation	1
	Deciding on the form of the look-up item	0
<b>Stage three: locating entry information</b>	Understanding the structure of the dictionary	2
	Finding multi-word units	2
	Understanding hyperlinks, searching for a word within the entry	0
<b>Stage four: Interpreting entry information</b>	Distinguishing between the components of the entry	4
	Finding information about the spelling of words	1
	Understanding symbols, labels, abbreviations (sth/sb), conventions	3
	Interpreting IPA and pronunciation information	4
	Interpreting information concerning word usage (restrictive labels)	3
	Interpreting information concerning word frequency	0
	Interpreting the definition	9
	Interpreting information about collocations/ deriving information from examples	12
	Interpreting information concerning idiomatic and figurative use	2
	Interpreting the C/U, T/I labels and their relation to the meaning	2
	Deriving information from picture sets	0
	Deriving information from thesauri, word clouds, etc.	1
	Finding word families	3
	Finding information about dictionary use	0

Table 2.  
The number of tokens assigned to each skill.

Table 2 provides an overview of how specific dictionary skills are represented in the reviewed course books in the sense of indicating how many times each skill appeared in these materials. It is clearly visible that the majority of the discussed skills are underrepresented. One of these neglected skills is the ability to decide what to look up, which seems particularly important when searching for multi-word units, such as phrasal verbs or idioms. Another one is finding important information concerning the use of looked-up items, such as frequency, formality, etc.

On the other hand, certain skills are more likely to be included in course books, and these are: interpreting information about collocations, deriving information from examples, interpreting the definition, distinguishing between the components of the entry and interpreting IPA and pronunciation information.

Chart 1 below presents the distribution of tokens across the skills that were mentioned at least once in teaching materials. The data indicates that, while the four most frequently mentioned abilities account for over 50% of tokens, the remaining 18 items are represented by only 44% of tokens.

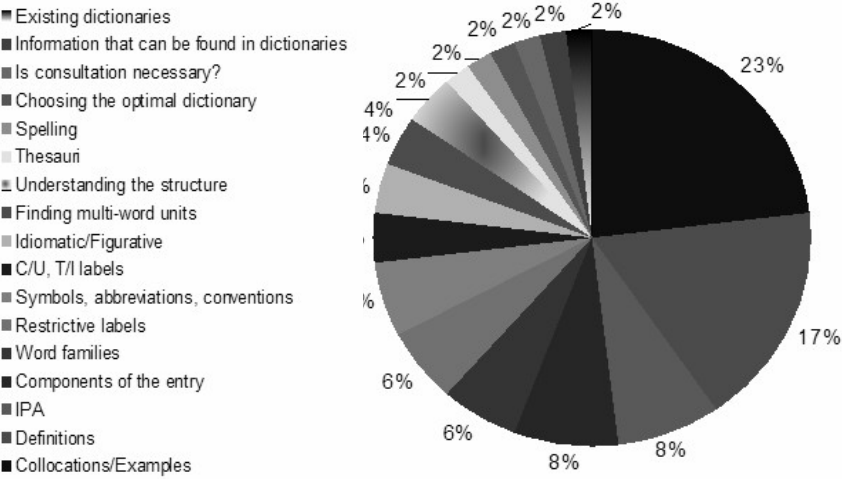


Chart 1. Distribution of tokens across particular skills.

It appears that the most frequently mentioned items were the ones that related to basic consultation skills. While such an approach might be regarded as useful, since it allows the authors to ensure that students possess “the basics”, it might be also argued that the more advanced skills are the ones that require more attention, since they might take more time to master.

The total number of exercises in each book is presented in Table 3. Titles *in italics* represent the books that were no longer available on the Polish publishing market in 2012.

<b>1</b>	Upstream Proficiency	0
<b>2</b>	<i>Paths to Proficiency</i>	0
<b>3</b>	Objective Proficiency	0
<b>4</b>	<i>Focus on Proficiency</i>	0
<b>5</b>	Grammar and Vocabulary for Cambridge Advanced and Proficiency	0
<b>6</b>	Face2face Advanced	0
<b>7</b>	Cutting Edge Advanced	0
<b>8</b>	Proficiency Masterclass	1
<b>9</b>	New English File Advanced	2
<b>10</b>	<i>Proficiency Gold</i>	2
<b>11</b>	Total English Advanced	5
<b>12</b>	Inside Out Advanced	9
<b>13</b>	Focus on Advanced English CAE	18
<b>TOTAL:</b>		<b>37</b>

Table 3.

The number of dictionary-oriented exercises found in teaching materials.

The data presented in Table 3 shows that there are relatively few teaching materials which contain more than two dictionary-oriented exercises, whereas the majority of coursebooks do not include any activities that make it possible for students to develop dictionary skills.

The distribution of dictionary-oriented exercises/materials across the textbooks that contained them is presented in Chart 2:

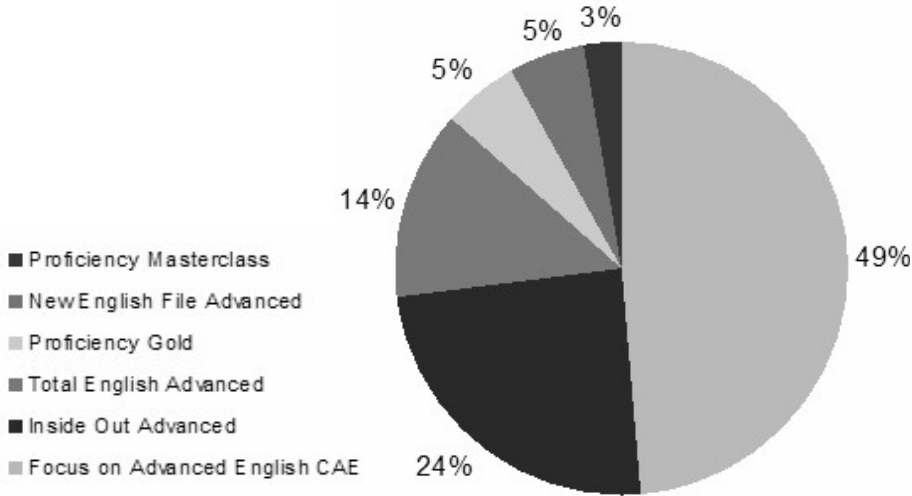


Chart 2.  
Dictionary-oriented contents in surveyed textbooks.

Chart 2 shows how unevenly the discussed skills are represented in the materials which underwent the authors’ examination. It cannot pass unnoticed that only 6 out of 13 books were presented in the pie chart because only as few as these contain any dictionary skills exercises.

Discussion

Providing definite answers to the questions posed in this article proved to be relatively difficult. This difficulty stems mostly from some discrepancy between the textbooks, as well as uneven distribution of tokens in Table 2. However, the outcomes seem to indicate that not only certain *reference skills* but also dictionary-oriented exercises as such are underrepresented in the TEFL advanced learners’ coursebooks.

Let us first consider the total number of these exercises. 37 such activities were found in 13 books, comprising the total number of 2906 pages. Statistically, one dictionary-oriented exercise occurs every 78.54 pages. However, more than half of the books surveyed contained none of those, and almost exactly half of the exercises were found in just one book. In addition, 32 out of 37 activities (86.49%) were grouped in 3 books.

These results seem to indicate that the distribution of dictionary-oriented activities across textbooks is relatively uneven. While one might attempt to correlate their number with some variables — such as the date of publication, the publishing house, or even the author — the general conclusion is that there seems to be no consistent policy as regards the inclusion of such materials in the textbooks.

As for *reference skills*, the distribution of tokens across particular (sets of) skills appears to be uneven. Some of them were not mentioned in the books surveyed (6 out of 23), while others were given much attention.

It appears that most student's books focus on the skills connected with using basic elements of a dictionary entry: definitions and collocations/examples (collocations in the ALDs, usually written **in bold**, are included in the example phrases — hence both pieces of information belong to one category in this work), followed by interpreting the IPA and distinguishing between the components of the entry. However, even in the case of the high-frequency items, the number of tokens indicates that, statistically speaking, the chance of finding an exercise targeting a given skill is relatively low. For instance, one *Collocations/Examples* activity occurs every 242.2 pages (0.41 per 100 pages).

However, this ratio is still relatively high, as compared to other skills. For instance, very little attention is paid to one of the most important aspects of the productive use of a consultation source, i.e. utilizing thesauri and finding precise synonyms to replace more “general” vocabulary items (1 token!).

Though the authors are far from being judgmental, it is noteworthy that without the two books that contain the highest number of dictio-

nary exercises (cf. Table 2), the results of the survey would have been markedly worse. In such a case, apart from the decrease in the number of activities, only 8 out of 23 skills would have been given any attention (instead of 17). Therefore, it was decided to describe these two books in greater detail in order to explore their approach to acquiring/perfecting *reference skills*.

*Focus on Advanced English CAE* is a noteworthy example of a book in which there exists a separate section devoted solely to developing dictionary skills. Thus, it might be stated that this book attempts to convey dictionary knowledge in a systematic way. Similar approach was adopted in *Inside Out Advanced*, the main difference being the fact that dictionary-oriented sections there are divided into several sub-sections spread throughout the book.

Interestingly, such (sub)sections are usually available in the self-study vocabulary books (e.g. *English Collocations in Use* by O'Dell and McCarthy, 2008). One might conclude that, for certain reasons, publishing houses are reluctant to adopt the same, fairly consistent policy in the case of regular student's books. The only consistency observed was the fact that no electronic/online ALDs were targeted in the books surveyed. While this attitude might be understandable in the case of the older publications, the later books that were surveyed do not introduce a revised approach to this topic.

## Conclusions

The results of the study indicate that targeting dictionary skills appears to be an "optional extra" rather than one of the "core" features of the student's books and that their distribution across textbooks is relatively haphazard. Our results concur with the findings of Müller (2000) who stated that "the use of dictionary-based exercises across textbooks varies considerably" (cited in: Welker, 2010: 314) and the results of Molenda's previous study (2012) where only 2% of the respondents confirmed that student's books were their source of dictionary "know-how."

Moreover, with the electronic ALDs gradually replacing the printed reference materials, the number of skills required to use a dictionary is



expected to increase. Nowadays, there already exist certain skills that are specific only to the online/electronic sources (e.g. using the wildcars<sup>8</sup>) and they should be given some attention by the teachers.

Finally, the results indicate that teachers who are aware of the necessity of teaching dictionary skills, would most probably need to refer to some external resources. While some resources might be already available (e.g. websites of the publishing houses or the aforementioned self-study books), the authors of this article are currently working on creating databases of free dictionary activities for advanced students of English. It is hoped that their focus on the free online versions will make using ALDs more accessible for the students.

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8 Using the \* and ? symbols to replace unknown letter(s). They might prove useful while searching for derivatives, e.g. typing \*estimate (=any number of symbols + estimate) would fetch words such as *underestimate* and *overestimate*.

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Appendix:

Coursebooks surveyed:

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