

Dictionary Activities

Cindy Leaney

Cambridge
Handbooks
for Language
Teachers

Series Editor
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Dictionary Activities



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Introduction

Learner dictionaries get better and better. They have more information and are easier to access and to understand than ever before. And, with the advent of electronic formats, space is no longer the problem it was.

There is a tremendous amount of information in a good learner's dictionary – sometimes an overwhelming amount. Helping students tap into that information efficiently is one of the best ways to help them become independent, lifelong language learners.

These activities are designed to foster good dictionary skills, help create good language learning habits and appeal to a variety of learning styles.

The activities are teacher-friendly and require little in the way of preparation or technology (apart from those that use the CD-ROM and some online activities) and can be adapted to a variety of language teaching contexts.

What makes learner dictionaries special?

The activities are based on the features of learner dictionaries that have become standard: clear definitions written using a graded defining vocabulary, frequency indicators, collocation information, navigational devices, example sentences, pronunciation, grammar and usage information.

When **choosing a dictionary**, it is worth taking the time to decide which features are most important to you and your students, and to evaluate how well designed the features are in each dictionary.

Defining vocabularies

One of the most distinctive differences between dictionaries written for native speakers of a language and learners of that language is that the definitions in learner dictionaries are written using a restricted defining vocabulary.

The number of words, or more accurately the number of senses of words, in a defining vocabulary varies, depending on the level of the dictionary.

An advanced level dictionary normally uses around 2,000 words in its defining vocabulary, an intermediate about 1,600 and a basic dictionary about 1,200.

Dictionary Activities

Inclusion criteria

One of the first steps in creating a dictionary is deciding which words to define. Now that dictionary makers have access to huge databases of language, called *corpora*, they are able to make very informed decisions about a word's frequency in different contexts (spoken v. written, academic, business, etc.), the word's coverage and range, and the words it frequently co-occurs with (its collocations).

Navigational devices

All the major learner dictionaries have navigational devices to help the user find the right sense of a word. They are called guidewords, signposts, menus or shortcuts.

The first chapter in this book has activities to practise using these devices and to help build dictionary confidence.

Example sentences

Example or model sentences are usually taken from written or spoken corpora. They may be modified to make them more accessible. Whereas advanced dictionaries opt for full sentences, on the whole, the tendency in intermediate dictionaries is to include only sentence fragments in entries for all but the most frequent words. This is simply due to lack of space – intermediate dictionary formats are smaller.

However, dictionaries on CD-ROM can hold more text and so may have an examples bank. It depends on how much space is used for sound, video, interactive exercises, etc.

Style and usage labels

These labels tell the user when, where and how words and phrases are used. They may indicate whether a word is marked as formal or informal, whether it is used in different ways in certain contexts, and whether it is specific to a variety of English (e.g. British, American or Australian).

Multi-word items and collocations

Vocabulary teaching has recognized how important it is to teach (and learn!) chunks of language, rather than individual words. Chunks include formulaic expressions (*Have a nice day!*), sayings and catchphrases (*better late than never, make my day*); many idioms (*a red herring, down in the dumps*); phrasal verbs (*to get on with, to run out of*), many discourse markers (*by the way, as a matter of fact*), and fixed or semi-fixed collocations (*wishful thinking, behind bars*). The best of the dictionaries present this information clearly and efficiently.

Some things to consider when choosing a dictionary

What navigational devices are there? Are they easy to use?

How many headwords are there? Are inclusion criteria described?

Are definitions clear? Is there a defining vocabulary? How many words does it consist of? Is it listed at the back of the book?

Are example sentences useful?

Are there good style and usage labels?

How is pronunciation represented?

Are the grammar and usage notes clear?

Is it easy to find multi-word items (phrasal verbs, idioms)?

Are collocations included?

Are there study pages, and are these useful?

Is there any website support (worksheets, lesson plans, etc.) for the teacher?

Are there student resources (interactive activities online, links, etc.) on the website?

The activities

This book is designed so that teachers can ‘dip in’ and select the activities that are most suitable for your students and your teaching context, and those that will be most helpful in meeting your teaching objectives.

The activities are grouped into chapters. There is a short introduction at the beginning of each chapter to help you find the activities you want to use.

Have a look at the Contents on pages v–viii, decide which chapter best suits your lesson focus, read the short introduction, then flick through the activity titles in that chapter.

Each activity is laid out to show the aim, focus, level and time plus any preparation needed. Then there is a step-by-step description of the procedure for that activity. This is followed by answers where appropriate, possible variations and suggested follow-up.

All the timings are approximate and will vary depending on the group.

Many of the activities include sample material in boxes which you can photocopy and take into the classroom or simply use as a model to create your own material. You may, of course, prefer to put the material on the board or use an OHP.

I hope that you enjoy them.

Dictionary Activities

Note

The majority of the examples in this book are taken from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and the *Cambridge Learner's Dictionary*. We have used the abbreviated forms *CALD* and *CLD* in this book.

Confidence and dictionary skills-building activities

This chapter has a range of activities to help learners understand how monolingual learner dictionaries work. The idea is to help them get used to the features of good learner dictionaries so that they can get the most out of them.

Many of the activities are aimed at lower-intermediate learners, who may be less familiar with how dictionaries work and need more help with basics like alphabetical order.

There are also activities which are suitable for learners with a higher language level such as 1.13 Navigating the dictionary: Using guidewords and signposts 2, and 1.14 Locating multi-word items.

The main thing is to try to get learners using dictionaries happily and comfortably. A little dictionary work, and often, is the key to learner independence.

