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Renata Szczepaniak

The Role of Dictionary Use in the Comprehension of Idiom Variants

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Renata Szczepaniak

Introduction

Due to lexicographers' unremitting interest in the opinions and expectations concerning their dictionaries one can already talk of a "user-perspective" (Hartmann 2001) well-established in lexicography. Not only the needs of dictionary owners, but also the way they approach the task of consultation and the influence of dictionary use on performance are thoroughly explored with a view to improving on new editions. The scale of over thirty-year research is marked by an increasing number of versatile, more and more specialised empirical studies, as well as by the need for a general overview and professional assessment of the quickly accumulating results (see, e.g., Diab 1990, Hulstijn and Atkins 1998, Nesi 2000, Tono 2001).

Despite rapid advances in the field, the not-so-uncharted waters of dictionary consultation leave much to explore. As noted by Hartmann (2001: 81),

[t]he conditions of dictionary use can only be determined by accurate empirical observation. Among the parameters to be investigated are (various types of) dictionaries consulted by (various types of) users during (various types of) activities requiring (various types of) strategies.

In particular, the intuitively appealing image of the pedagogical dictionary as a tool for boosting comprehension of a written text has not yet been confirmed beyond doubt, and requires fresh research perspectives.

This study, by no means aspiring to become a final word on the subject, is an attempt to contribute to the steadily increasing body of "more dynamic observations of what real users do with real dictionaries in real situations of communicative deficit" (Tono 2001: 83). The situation of highly advanced students performing the complex comprehension task of decoding contextually modified idioms, viewed as a source of disruption to the fluent reading process, has been selected as a relatively unexplored niche, and, at the same time, a convenient springboard for investigating the situation of dictionary use in its entirety. It is hoped that this project, by setting out to disclose the roots of success or failure in the aforementioned task, will shed some light on the central dilemma of the usefulness of the monolingual dictionary for advanced reading.

Chapter 1 introduces the subject of receptive dictionary use as one of utmost concern to pedagogical lexicography. By emphasising the complexity of the reference act, it points to the need for a holistic treatment of the consultation process, without dismissing its final stages as falling outside lexicographic interest. A selective overview of relevant empirical findings is followed by some methodological considerations. Finally, the rationale for further research in the field is spelled out, and the scope of the present study delineated.

Since instruction in dictionary use is indirectly affected by views on the reading process, Chapter 2 summarises the tenets of three main reading theories, with special emphasis on the top-down model and its long-lasting influence on L2 reading, reflected in the "inference versus look-up" controversy.

Chapter 3 foregrounds the case of occasional transformations of idioms as a serious obstacle to the reception of the language of the press and fiction by non-native readers. Starting with some general remarks on the phenomenon of linguistic creativity, it specifies the

meaning of the term *idiom* in the present study, and dwells on creative – as distinct from systemic – idiom variation. An attempt is made to explain the sources of difficulties in processing the former.

Chapter 4 highlights certain problems involved in using the monolingual learner's dictionary to tackle the comprehension deficit in question as a function of the treatment of idioms in the entry.

Chapter 5 discusses the procedure and results of the experiment designed to embrace the consecutive steps undertaken in the task of decoding idioms (process-oriented perspective) as well as their effectiveness (product-oriented perspective). The data is analysed in order to isolate patterns of consultation behaviour responsible for advanced learners' performance.

The study ends with conclusions and comments on the role of the monolingual learner's dictionary in the comprehension of contextually modified idioms. An attempt is made to extrapolate from the described case to the general picture of monolingual dictionary use in reading, as well as to point out possible lexicographical and pedagogical implications, and offer suggestions for further research.

1. Receptive Dictionary Use: Research Background

1.1. Primacy of receptive dictionary use

Much to the disappointment of lexicographers, most of the richness squeezed into a modern EFL dictionary, i.e., encoding information on syntax, frequency, usage, and the paradigmatic and syntagmatic relations that a lexical unit enters into, remains unused – a fact attesting to the conservatism of dictionary users, who traditionally treat a dictionary as an instrument primarily for decoding (Béjoint 1994: 152). Béjoint's (1981) 21-question survey investigating the use of monolingual English dictionaries by French students at the University of Lyon revealed that monolingual learner's dictionaries (MLDs) were more often used for decoding than for encoding activities regardless of the medium:

1. L2 > L1 translation: 86%
2. Written Comprehension: 60%
3. Written Composition, including L1 > L2 translation: 58%
4. Oral Comprehension: 14%
5. Oral Composition: 9% (Béjoint 1981: 216)

In Tomaszczyk's (1979) comprehensive study, the frequency of the use of a monolingual and bilingual dictionary for encoding (writing) (67.3%) slightly surpassed that for decoding (reading) (61.6%) in a heterogeneous group of foreign language learners. Also, 60.7% of Nuccorini's (1992: 92) Italian subjects reported receptive activities as the primary reason for consultation.

Theoretically, receptive dictionary use may occur in all tasks involving the comprehension of an L2 text, be it written or spoken, that is, in what are traditionally called "decoding", as opposed to "encoding", activities.¹ In practice, however, it is normally restricted to reading and L2 > L1 translation, although, as Scholfield (1999: 13) notices, some needs questionnaires (e.g., Béjoint 1981, Tomaszczyk 1979) reported isolated cases of dictionary use during listening. The scope of this study is limited to the use of the monolingual L2 dictionary; hence in further discussion a receptive situation will be synonymous with reading.

For readers, the most vital piece of information within the entry is meaning. Unsurprisingly, it ranks high in lists of information categories regarded as the most frequently sought after:

1. Meaning: 87%
2. Syntactic information: 53%
3. Synonyms: 52%
4. Spelling and pronunciation: 25%
5. Language variety: 19%
6. Etymology: 5% (Béjoint 1981: 215)

¹ The former include reading, listening, and translation from L2 into L1, whereas the latter are: writing, speaking, and translation from L1 into L2 (Béjoint 1981: 209).

The fact that 87% of Béjoint's subjects placed meaning among the three most often looked up pieces of information finds confirmation in the comparable data from Tomaszczyk (1979: 111), where 85% of subjects turned to the monolingual dictionary for meaning (definitions or equivalents). The Needs Research project into the use of LDOCE1 by intermediate students in six countries, carried out in 1980 by the Longman ELT Dictionaries Department, revealed that checking the meaning of words accounted for 60% of all look-ups (Summers 1988: 114). In Nuccorini (1992: 92) meaning was the reason for consultation in 75% of cases, with pronunciation coming next (14.2%). 99% of Wingate's (2002: 100) intermediate subjects consult the dictionary for meaning often or very often.

Given that the MLD emerges as a tool, above all, for solving comprehension problems arising in the process of reading, it is the interpretation and application of the meaning information in the entry that will be explored in the empirical part of this study.

1.2. Complexity of the reference act: Potential pitfalls

Even though checking a word in a dictionary is usually performed in a routine, largely mechanical manner, to think of research into the steps of dictionary use as dwelling on the obvious is to give the lie to the complexity of the strategies involved. Recurrent trends in dictionary-using habits have been incorporated in models of the consultation process, whose elements remain basically the same across several publications, the modifications depending mainly on whether they apply to the use of a dictionary for all language tasks (encoding and decoding), or only to reception.² The most recent model neatly summarises the results of prior research into the steps that readers follow in their consultations (Figure 1).

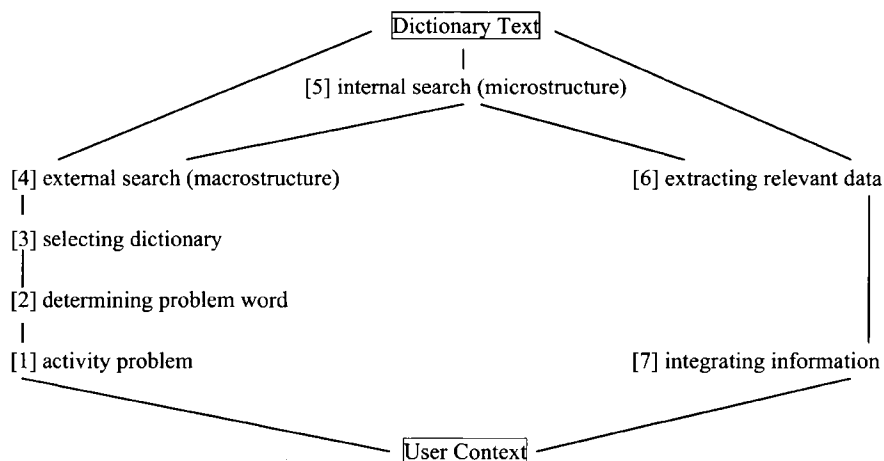
Steps one, two and three involve the recognition of the problem and the decision as to the need for consultation, both of which, if absent, automatically cancel further stages. Points four and five concern the reference skills: the search³ for the appropriate entry and locating the desired information within the entry. Equally important, though frequently marginalised by students and teachers alike, is retrieval and comprehension of the relevant data, as well as integrating it back into context – a process undoubtedly requiring more than a cursory reading of the definition. The whole dictionary reference act is inextricably linked with inference, which not only frames it, as it were, but “is relevant as a *part* of dictionary use itself” (Scholfield 1999: 28). Firstly, the choice of the right sense requires that the user have some idea of the meaning inferred from context; secondly, the use of examples also requires some inferencing skills. Ideally, context and dictionary are used in a back-and-forth way to achieve the ultimate goal of the look-up process, that is “to understand the

² Cf. Béjoint (1994: 155–156). The models directly applicable to dictionary use in reading are to be found in Scholfield (1982, 1999) and Hartmann (2001).

³ A terminological distinction should be made between a look-up and a search, which are often used interchangeably. As Atkins and Varantola (1998b: 87) point out, a look-up refers to a single look-up of one headword in one dictionary, whereas the group of look-ups or one look-up in one or more dictionaries relating to one problem constitutes a search. Therefore, only if a lexical problem is solved after one trial, is a look-up synonymous with a search.

meaning information given in the chosen subentry, and somehow to combine this with the meaning of the text where the unknown was met” (Scholfield 1999: 28). The evaluation of the outcome of one’s efforts should crown the consultation.

Figure 1. Components of the consultation process (Hartmann 2001: 91)



Receptive dictionary use, less complex perhaps than dictionary use for encoding purposes (see, e.g., Humblé 2001: 16, 101), is certainly not problem-free. Although the whole consultation process requires considerable effort, it is the user’s macro- and microstructure skills that have received the most attention so far (e.g., Béjoint 1981; Atkins and Varantola 1998a, 1998b; Tono 2001: 116–142); stages six and seven, where errors are harder to detect, have been treated less extensively. However, unless allowance is made for these steps, the picture of dictionary use cannot be comprehensive. Only when dictionary users’ behaviour has been dissected, can receptive errors be spotted, analysed and prevented in future. What follows is a recapitulation of the findings from previous research that account for the negative and, to a lesser extent, positive effect of the presence of a dictionary in situations of comprehension deficit.

1.3. Previous research

1.3.1. No effect of dictionary use on performance

One of the first studies on the role of a dictionary in the context of reading – Hosenfeld (1977, cited in Tono 2001: 30) – registered the adverse effect of looking-up words in a glossary on the reading process: the fluency suffered and students tended to decode word by word. Therefore, it was postulated that using a reference work should be treated as a

last-resort strategy. Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984),⁴ who conducted four large-scale studies on the influence of the use of mono- and bilingual dictionaries on advanced students' success in L2 reading tests, obtained the most surprising results: "[e]xcept in the case of one text, no significant relation was found between students' test scores and dictionary use. It did not seem to make any difference on the test whether a student used a bilingual dictionary, a monolingual dictionary, or no dictionary at all" (Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss 1984: 268). Padron and Waxman (1988) managed to isolate fourteen strategies related to reading achievement on the basis of a reading comprehension test and a questionnaire on which students indicated how often they used each one. "Looking up words in the dictionary" was singled out as a negative strategy. Similarly, Neubach and Cohen (1988, cited in Nesi 2000: 37–39), who observed six students during a reading comprehension task in which the use of a dictionary was optional, report disappointing results.

Negative effect (or lack of positive effect) of the dictionary condition on reading performance, however discouraging, in itself does not prove the uselessness of a dictionary as a tool for assisting comprehension. Closer analysis of numerous factors interfering with efficient exploitation of the dictionary potential reveals the difficulty of creating conditions that would optimise dictionary-aided reading. Above all, the use of a dictionary in the experimental group and the subjects' reference skills cannot be taken for granted.

1.3.1.1. Ignoring the dictionary

It needs to be stressed that the mere availability of a dictionary in the experimental group rarely leads automatically to a multitude of reference acts. For a receptive situation of dictionary use to take place, the reader must experience a problem – a lexical gap that disrupts the reading process. Since "everyone has different degrees of word knowledge for different words, and, for many words, we simply do not need to have elaborated knowledge" (Stoller and Grabe 1993: 38), the lexical item may be either totally unfamiliar or, more likely in the case of advanced students, vaguely familiar. It is the latter, "incomplete" meanings that are probably the most frequent targets of good readers (Scholfield 1997: 285). Obviously, a reference act will take place on condition that the lexical gap is irreparable by means other than a dictionary (e.g., a native speaker's opinion, marginal gloss or highly informative context), and the item is truly important for comprehension. This relevance, as Scholfield (1999: 17–18) points out, might stem from the task type or from the unfamiliar item's role in activating appropriate schemata.⁵ Difficult vocabulary items tend to negatively affect comprehension only when they appear in strategically important parts of the text; otherwise, they are simply skipped (Freebody and Anderson 1983, cited in Nation and Coady 1988: 99).

One of the frequently cited studies whose results gave lexicographers food for thought by reporting no influence of dictionary use on reading comprehension scores was Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984). The replication of the experiment revealed that reading com

⁴ The research in this case was motivated by the controversy between Israeli EFL teachers and administrators of examinations over the issue of dictionary use during examinations.

⁵ The term, introduced by Bartlett (1932; 1995), refers to knowledge of the world that readers store in memory and may activate when processing new information; see section 2.1.

prehension tests may not be affected by a dictionary when: 1) the test checks comprehension of text and not of individual vocabulary items; 2) the dictionary does not provide the necessary information; 3) the user fails to identify keywords to be looked up (Nesi and Meara 1991: 639–643).

The more recent research by Hulstijn (1993) confirmed the positive relationship between word relevance and the reading goal on look-up.⁶ Furthermore, it showed that easily inferable words were looked up less frequently than words whose meaning could not be easily guessed from context, although inferring ability turned out to be a factor of minor significance compared to vocabulary knowledge. Students with limited vocabulary knowledge tended to look up more words than advanced students,⁷ but, surprisingly, greater inferring ability did not result in fewer consultations. Apparently, students were eager to check their inferences, which tallies with the results of Knight's (1994) investigation into the effect of bilingual dictionary use on incidental learning and reading comprehension in high- and low-ability students. Although fewer words per text-set were actually looked up by the low verbal ability group than the high-ability group, the correlation between the number of targets looked up and comprehension scores was high only in the former. Whereas there was a significant difference between the dictionary and no-dictionary condition for the low-ability group, the high-ability group seemed to be less dependent on vocabulary for comprehension. In the dictionary condition there was little difference between both ability groups (Knight 1994: 293). "[I]t appears that many high verbal ability students refer to the dictionary when they have already correctly guessed the meaning", Knight (1994: 295) concludes, thereby partly corroborating the opinion of Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984: 271) that the more proficient students know enough to manage without a dictionary.

Predictably, intermediate and advanced L2 learners are more likely to look up words when reading a shorter text rather than a text of more than one page. Finally, the accessibility of dictionary information influences the frequency of look-ups, with an electronic dictionary having an advantage over a paper one (Hulstijn, Hollander and Greidanus 1996: 336).

All things considered, the effort of consulting a dictionary must be seen as worthwhile before the learner decides to interrupt the reading, especially since "[t]he dictionary continues to be seen as an instrument designed to provide quick and superficial support in case of emergency" (Béjoint 1994: 152).

1.3.1.2. Misusing the dictionary

Of all potential sources of failure in comprehension tasks despite the presence of a dictionary, inadequate reference skills figure as a major culprit. Regrettably, "[v]ery little attention

⁶ Irrelevance of some target words to the completion of the task was also pointed out by Tono (2001: 75) as a factor responsible for the difference between his results and those of Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984).

⁷ That higher proficiency students tend to search the dictionary less than lower proficiency learners is also stated in Atkins and Varantola (1998a: 34) and Tono (2001: 112). On the other hand, Hatherall's (1984) advanced subjects used the dictionary more often than the less advanced ones. This surprising fact is explained tentatively: "[p]erhaps less advanced students are less confident of retrieving the necessary information and thus more reluctant to try" (Hatherall 1984: 187).

has been paid to how the learners' particular use of dictionaries affects results" (Tono 2001: 56). Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984: 268) reject inadequate reference skills as an explanation for their puzzling results as "both too simplistic and too pessimistic to be useful", instead pointing to students' insufficient knowledge of syntax, or the so-called "threshold effect", according to which more than five per cent of unknown words in a text makes it unclear and prevents guessing.

Tono's (2001: 75–83) investigation into the effects of long-term dictionary use on reading comprehension proved the existence of a positive correlation between the overall results of the Dictionary Reference Skills Test Battery (DRSTB) and comprehension scores. Still, no straightforward relationship between DRSTB subscores and reading comprehension scores could be discovered. Apart from control over the reference skills, intensive training in dictionary use that the subjects had received was pointed out by Tono (2001: 75) as responsible for the difference between his results and those of Bensoussan, Sim and Weiss (1984).

Tight control over subjects' reference skills being an exception rather than a rule, insights into reference problems can be gained from error analysis and observational studies, such as Neubach and Cohen (1988, cited in Nesi 2000: 37–39). The major difficulties with the macrostructure search experienced by the subjects during the consultation were: alphabetic ordering, inability to identify the right headword, abandoning the search, experiencing frustration during the search, and continuing the search when the target item had been found. Similarly, McCreary and Dolezal (1999) report their subjects' difficulties in following the guidewords in alphabetical order (put down to the Asian background of many of the subjects) and unwillingness to follow the cross-references, perceived by many students as "too much work, too time-consuming, and... dependent on a fine and accurate knowledge of alphabetical order applied not just to the first letter of the word, but also to the second and third letters" (McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 132). However, it needs to be noted that the students had an American college desk dictionary, and not a learner's monolingual dictionary at their disposal, which might have affected the accessibility of information.

After the entry has been found, the user might run into difficulties with retrieving the information and understanding the definition. When searching the microstructure, some of Neubach and Cohen's (1988, cited in Nesi 2000: 37–39) students tended to read only the first definition and were uncertain about the word meaning they managed to arrive at. Similarly, Wingate (2002: 115) singled out reading only the beginning of the entry among the factors responsible for the lack of statistically significant difference in a comprehension task for intermediate learners of German in Hong Kong. In her study, moreover, the defining vocabulary was the most serious obstacle (41.7% of errors resulted from encountering unknown words in definitions), to be followed by derivational definitions (12.5%) and definition structure (4.2%).

What sort of consultation problems are advanced students likely to grapple with? Nesi and Haill's (2002) naturalistic and holistic research into receptive dictionary use provides particularly interesting findings. Although, as the authors admit, the portrait of "international students' normal receptive use of dictionaries" is imperfect due to a large number of variables left uncontrolled (e.g., mother tongues, language ability, dictionary-using skill, choice of dictionary, choice of look-up word, choice of text), the study offers an in-depth analysis of the problems that learners at university level might encounter in a natural situation of dictionary consultation. The data (77 reports on the way international under

graduate students at a British University looked up five selected words from a text of their choice), collected over a period of three years, enabled the identification of five categories of look-up problems:

1. The subject chose the wrong dictionary entry or sub-entry (34 cases).
2. The subject chose the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry but misinterpreted the information it contained (11 cases).
3. The subject chose the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry, but did not realise that the word had a slightly different (often figurative) meaning in context (7 cases).
4. The subject found the correct dictionary entry or sub-entry, but rejected it as inappropriate in context (5 cases).
5. The word or appropriate word meaning was not in any of the dictionaries the subject consulted (8 cases) (Nesi and Haill 2002: 282).

Only the first type of error involves macrostructure skills; inadequate microstructure skills or lack of information induced the remaining error categories. Among the explanations for the misinterpretation of the entry is the “kidrule strategy”⁸ (Miller and Gildea 1987, cited in McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 123), in which the familiar part of the dictionary definition is taken for the equivalent of the headword. To use an example, a child who looked up *erode* found a familiar-looking *eat out, eat away*, composed a sentence using *eat out* and finally replaced it with the new word *erode*, to obtain the curious construct *Our family erodes a lot* (Miller and Gildea 1987: 97–98, cited in McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 123). Wingate (2002: 165–167, 181) regards kidrule as a direct consequence of students’ difficulty in comprehending and assembling meaning components into an equivalent of the target word:

If a suitable equivalent is available in the definition and the learners manage to identify it, the look-up action will be successful. If a definition does not contain an equivalent, especially weaker subjects still search for one and accept unsuitable words instead, just because they are familiar (Wingate 2002: 181).

Another reason for misinterpretation was the “sham use” of dictionaries, i.e., disregarding or distorting the dictionary information so as to be able to retain one’s preconceived notions:

Students believed they had found their solution in the dictionary, but in reality, they had only read enough of the entry to confirm a preconceived idea, or simply deviated from the dictionary information on the grounds of interpretation and (personal) association (Müllich 1990: 487, quoted in Nesi and Haill 2002: 288).

Errors of the third type occurred because the subjects either had not recognised the discrepancy between definition and contextual meaning, or “no effort was made on the part of the subject to use the more generally applicable dictionary information to create context-specific ‘value glosses’” (Nesi and Haill 2002: 289). Some of the subjects who committed errors of type four had problems with understanding the language of the definition, others did not recognise the possibility of a figurative interpretation or were influenced by precon

⁸ Also observed with ESL students at an American university (McCreary and Dolezal 1999) and intermediate learners of German (Wingate 2002).