

## Teaching dictionary skills in the classroom

### Abstract

Dictionaries have long been recognised as a useful learning tool and there are many innovative and specialised dictionaries in the market. However, do teachers or learners really know how to use them to assist learning? It is believed that dictionary skills should be integrated into the English syllabus and taught explicitly in class. In this case, teachers play an important role in bridging the gap between the lexicographers and unskilled learners of English but so far, very few attempts have been made to teach the appropriate skills. This paper reports the progress of a research project in Hong Kong which aims at teaching dictionary skills to university students.

Keywords: dictionary use, learner training

This paper reports the progress of a research project entitled "Writing materials and training students to use various dictionaries effectively and efficiently to assist their learning in English", sponsored by the Action Learning Project of the University Grants Committee of Hong Kong.

### 1. Introduction

The reference book has always enjoyed a high status in Chinese culture, being regarded as "a teacher who cannot talk". Besides the real teachers who students can learn from in class, dictionaries are believed to be the most reliable alternative they can have. Thus, it is essential for them to know how to communicate and establish a good relationship with and benefit from this kind of teacher. However, due to the "inherent impediment" of such "teachers", students need to make much effort and learn special skills in order to understand and learn from them, especially at the initial stages of learning.

Aware of the potential inadequacies of their products *qua* learning tools, modern lexicographers and dictionary publishers alike have thought of many ways to make reference books more accessible, transparent and easy to understand than those in the past. For example, they put in a comprehensive introduction to explain what the dictionary offers and how to look up words in it. Sometimes, they produce separate dictionary workbooks designed to teach users to use the dictionary through various types of exercises, often graded, and which can be adapted for classroom teaching; in addition, audio-tapes may accompany the dictionary to teach users the sound symbols. The underlying assumption behind all these efforts is that users will have the ability to take the initiative and be willing to make the effort to try out the activities.

Many teachers will agree that this assumption is somehow optimistic. Both lexicographers and publishers have over-estimated the knowledge, ability and the level of persistence students would need in order to teach themselves how to use a dictionary. This is not to deny that students should not learn how to use dictionaries; instead, the current research proposes

to use English teachers to bridge the existing gap and teach the skills explicitly and systematically in class.

Teaching materials to train students to use dictionaries tend to be diffuse and disorganised and most EFL syllabuses have not included dictionary skills as a specific component. As a result, teachers who believe that dictionary use should be taught find themselves busy preparing their own materials and trying hard to squeeze the training into the already tight syllabus. Workbooks tend to be dictionary-specific and for general audiences. In order to make the training appropriate to the level and needs of one's own students, much work is needed to adapt and rewrite the material.

Moreover, English teachers may themselves lack expertise and knowledge in using dictionaries since this may require more than one's personal experience and awareness of developments in EFL lexicography. In order to use contemporary dictionaries efficiently and effectively, users are required to have "full understanding of what today's dictionaries seek to offer and how they do so" (Tickoo, 1989: 184). Rudimentary retrieval skills alone, such as knowing the ordering of the Latin alphabet, will be inadequate. Hence, teachers themselves will need training to discern the innovative features found in current dictionaries in order to teach students how to use them to assist learning.

Teacher training and/or workshops on how to teach dictionary use are essential. Moreover, the EFL syllabus should include dictionary skills as part of learning skills, like reading or writing skills. There should be teaching guidelines and activities in the English syllabus or course books to show teachers how to integrate dictionary use into their teaching. In this way, training students to be skilful dictionary users becomes a more achievable task than just relying on their initiative and ability. This is well supported by Battenburg (1991: 115) who states,

"Skills and strategies for using dictionaries should be taught in every second and foreign language classroom, for students are not only learning about dictionaries but also about language. Such instruction should continue throughout students' academic careers rather than being relegated to a class period or two at the beginning of the term".

## **2. Background of the research subjects**

### **2.1. The role of English in Hong Kong**

English and Chinese<sup>1</sup> are the two official languages of Hong Kong. English is often referred to as the second language of the city, although some would argue that English should be used only in certain business sectors in which foreign trade or clients are involved, and as a medium of instruction in some of the local secondary schools. In fact, many English-medium schools teach through a mixture of English and Chinese. The situation will experience changes in the coming school year (September 1998): by then, of the 400 government or government subsidised secondary schools in Hong Kong, only about one fourth will remain using English as the medium of instruction.

At tertiary level, some institutions use English as the medium of teaching while others use both English and Chinese. The subjects of this research are all first-year students from various

disciplines within an English medium university, attending a course in English for Academic Purposes.

## **2.2. Dictionary use in Hong Kong**

The teaching of dictionary skills has, until recently, not featured prominently in the teaching and learning of English in Hong Kong. English syllabuses prescribed by the Education Department of Hong Kong, giving guidelines to Hong Kong primary and secondary schools on the teaching of the four skills did, before 1995, not include the teaching of dictionary skills. Likewise the teaching of dictionary skills was not mentioned in the Education Commission Reports. Not surprisingly, dictionary skills have not been included in textbooks for use in the English classroom. Dictionaries have also failed to play any important role in English learning at tertiary level. Nonetheless, in the last three years, the situation has begun to change: dictionary skills are now being recognised as useful skills in language teaching and learning. The first official mention of the teaching of dictionary skills was made in 1995, in a booklet called "Bridging English Across Primary and Secondary Education" issued by the Curriculum Development Institute in response to the need to help primary students from Chinese-medium schools to bridge the gap as they enter English-medium secondary schools. It was recommended that basic skills which help them to learn and use English effectively in the secondary school should be taught. Dictionary skills were included under these "basic skills", along with study skills, reading skills, library skills and enquiry skills (Hong Kong Government, 1995). The teaching of dictionary skills has been included in the revised English Syllabus for Primary Schools since August 1996.

With regard to research related to dictionary use among students in Hong Kong, not much has been done. Projects that have been undertaken are either doctoral theses or individual experiments, most of which have remained unpublished. One project was carried out in 1996 with the aim of determining the habits of Hong Kong students in using dictionaries to learn in English (Chi and Ng, forthcoming) showed that the use of dictionaries is instrumentally linked to students' academic studies and that most students believed that they could benefit from using dictionaries largely to assist learning. The subjects included six hundred students from ten different secondary schools and an English-medium university. The results show that even though some students in the past have been taught how to use dictionaries to learn, there seems to be a discrepancy between the teaching focuses of the teachers and students' real needs. Taylor (1996, unpublished) conducted a survey on Hong Kong primary, secondary and tertiary teachers' views on the use of dictionaries and their implications. Through data obtained from questionnaires and interviews, he found that the major reason why these teachers did not teach or revise dictionary use in class, or did not encourage students to use dictionaries in class, was that of time constraint. Since dictionary use was not included in the syllabus, they did not want to spend time on it.

## **2.3. Research in the field of dictionary use**

Although much has been said about the importance of training users how to use dictionaries to learn and to find out what their needs are, research in this area has not featured prominently as an academic or educational focus in Asia.

In Europe, several large-scale projects which aim at determining students' habits in dictionary use are underway. However, the focuses of most of the research are on using bilingual or

bilingualised dictionaries to complete a task on translation, for example the EURALEX/AILA research project into dictionary use. As explained in the research report, the main objectives of the project were on dictionary users' look-up processes and on bilingual dictionaries. It was further explained that,

"...we want to find out what people really do when they use a dictionary to solve a linguistic problem, in this case when trying to translate a text either out of or into their native language" (Atkins and Varantola 1997: 2).

Similarly, research on dictionary use has drawn much attention from researchers in Japan recently. However, as in Europe, the focuses of such research work are mainly on bilingual or bilingualised dictionaries, since these are what are used by the majority of Japanese students. Translation work was also involved in most of the tests since this type of learning approach is widely employed. The subject groups of most of the project reported were homogeneous in nature: mostly Japanese students learning English as a foreign language.

In Hong Kong, English is either used as a medium of instruction in secondary schools and tertiary institutions or as a subject taught at school. Though bilingualised dictionaries are widely used among students, they do not really have a legitimate status in schools yet — a situation which may change after September 1998. Also, the English syllabuses, at various levels, in Hong Kong do not require students to do any translation work, which may explain why bilingualised or bilingual dictionaries have failed to gain any official status in schools or universities in the past. Hence, the research approach and focus on dictionary use carried out locally are different from the research that has been done or is in progress elsewhere in the world.

### **3. Aims, rationale and hypotheses**

#### **3.1. Aims**

There are two aims in this research project: first, to find out how much students know about information provided by the dictionary to assist their learning in English; followed by an evaluation of the effectiveness of explicit teaching of dictionary skills on students' reference abilities and habits. For the former, we want to find out whether students have acquired retrieval skills, which facilitate searching information from various dictionaries, to solve problems. The latter focuses on whether there is a change in students' habits and perceptions in using dictionaries to assist learning.

#### **3.2. Rationale and hypotheses**

It is essential to train students to become informed users of dictionaries. This involves work and effort from three stakeholders, viz. teachers, users (mainly students in this research) and lexicographers (including dictionary publishers), which one may regard as the 'lexicographical triangle'.

Retrieval skills and the knowledge of how to find a suitable dictionary to meet one's needs do not come naturally to students. Unless these are explicitly taught during lessons as a learning skill, it is only wishful thinking to believe students will have the initiative, ability and

persistence to search through the list of dictionaries available on the market and find the one(s) which suit(s) their needs. This implies they would have been able to identify their own needs, to understand the innovative features found in current dictionaries, to match them with the claims made by various dictionaries and successfully to pick the right dictionary/ies to use for the particular task. The assumption goes further in that students will teach themselves how to use a particular dictionary or type of dictionaries and be able to use them to solve their problems. Finally, they would have been so satisfied with the dictionaries that they would keep on using them in their learning.

I believe that students have not been informed of, or trained properly in, how to use various dictionaries to assist their learning of English. In order to benefit from the reference book, dictionary skills should be taught explicitly and systematically in class as a study skill and the teaching should be done by integrating the skills into an English syllabus. With proper training, students will be able to utilise this type of reference book more effectively to obtain information and to acquire knowledge of the language they most need or are interested in. Second, students will have greater autonomy in their learning process because it is believed that they will then become less dependent on the language teacher.

My hypotheses are thus:

Students do not know much about what various dictionaries that targeted them can offer in helping them to study; they are only using a very small percentage of information provided by dictionaries they know.

Dictionary knowledge should be included and integrated into the English syllabus that students are currently or will be studying so that time will be allocated to the teaching of it.

This also helps the teaching to be done in a systematic, effective and interesting way.

Students should be empowered with knowledge of the general features and specific functions of dictionaries which will be relevant to their use to help them make an informed choice in choosing a dictionary/dictionaries they desire and which can meet their needs.

#### **4. Research Design and Methodology**

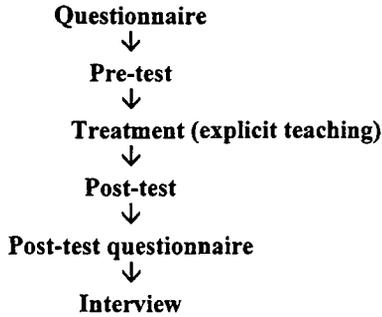
##### **4.1. Subjects**

Sixty-seven first-year students at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology took part in the test. The classes were assigned to the researcher and the course attended was "An English Enhancement Programme".

##### **4.2. Methodology**

There are five stages in the research as shown in table 1:

**Table 1:**



At the beginning of the course, students were asked to fill out a questionnaire which aimed to discover their dictionary habits and attitudes, with reference to learning. A pre-test was then given to tap students' knowledge of dictionary use. Questions asked were related to information provided by a learner dictionary, such as the sound symbols, grammatical information, the style labels etc., as well as British and American usage and culture specific words. The test was administered during normal lesson time. There was no time limit given and students could leave the classroom as soon as they had finished.

The treatment of the two experimental classes came in the form of explicit teaching. The material on dictionary use was integrated into the course and taught in normal class time. Since the material of the English course focussed on teaching students how to write a research paper, the material on dictionary use was designed to serve the purposes of reading and writing in an academic context. Dictionaries used in the teaching include four learner's dictionaries: *Cambridge International Dictionary of English* (1995), *Collins COBUILD English Dictionary* (1995), *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (1995) and *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1995); *Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture* (1993), *Longman Lexicon of Contemporary English* (1981) and *Longman Language Activator* (1993). The choice of dictionaries used in the teaching was made according to their relevance to the needs of the students in accomplishing the task, that is the research paper; another point of consideration was the time constraint imposed.

Both the post-test and the post-test questionnaire aimed first, to find out whether the subjects would use the dictionaries that they have learned how to use in the course, to do the test; second, if they did use dictionaries, we wanted to know which ones and how well they used them in answering questions. Again, there was no time restriction, and when students had finished working on the test, they proceeded to the post-test questionnaire.

After students had finished working on both the post-test and the questionnaire, I explained the whole project to them. For ethical reasons, I offered students in the control group the chance of learning the dictionary skills, in the form of workshops, in the following semester. Both the experimental and control group students were requested to write to me to arrange for an interview for data validation. It was made clear that the arrangement for the interview was done on a strictly voluntary basis. Those in the experimental group were also asked for their comments on the interest level and usefulness of the teaching materials. Material writers and

teachers of the English course will be interviewed separately to discuss the appropriateness and feasibility of integrating dictionary use material into the course.

**5. Initial findings**

Most of the stages have just been completed and much work still needs to be done in processing the raw data. Hence, only some initial findings of the first two stages will be reported. This will be followed by an outline on what will be done in the later part of the research when the data are ready, with the aim of determining whether dictionary skills should be taught through integrating material into the English syllabus in the classroom.

**5.1. Questionnaire**

Sixty-six students filled out and returned the questionnaire. Question 1 asked whether students owned any dictionaries. All except one owned one or more than one dictionary. The type(s) of dictionary/ies students owned is/are shown in Table 2:

**Table 2:**

- 1 = Monolingual English dictionaries
- 2 = Bilingualised or bilingual (English/Chinese) dictionaries
- 3 = Electronic (portable notebook dictionaries)

Type(s) of dictionary	1	2	3	1+2	1+3	2+3	1+2+3
Percentage of students owning it/them	1.5	13.8	0	30.7	1.5	12.3	40

Questions 5–7 were asked to discover students’ perceptions of the role of dictionaries in learning. They were asked how far they agreed or disagreed with the three statements; the answers were, to a large extent, positive. The data are shown in Table 3.

**Table 3:**

- 1 = Strongly agree
- 2 = Agree
- 3 = Disagree
- 4 = Strongly Disagree
- 5 = I don’t know

Questions	1	2	3	4	5
5. Dictionaries are useful in helping students to learn English	17	47	0	0	2
6. Dictionaries are useful in helping me to learn English	10	45	4	0	7
7. A good learner does not need to go to dictionaries for help	0	3	31	29	3

Question 12 asked “How often do you refer to a dictionary?” and students were given two periods of time to comment on: *during term time* and *during vacation*. Students were required to pick from the following time frequencies for the questions: *all the time*, *very often*, *quite often*, *occasionally* and *never*. A total of 66% of the students answered they would use a dictionary *very often* or *quite often* during term time whereas the frequencies dropped to 24% during vacation time. Students were further asked in Question 13 “On what occasions do you

use a dictionary". They were given eight options to choose from and the answers are shown in Table 4:

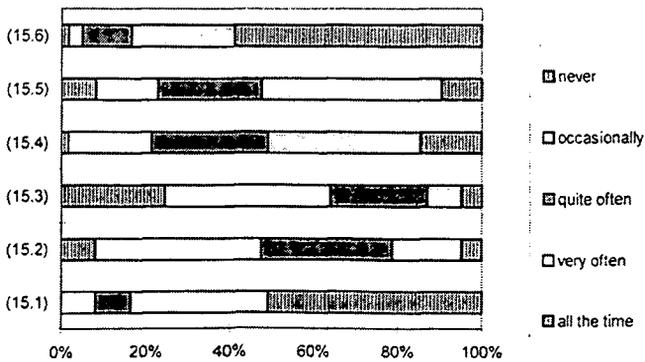
**Table 4:**

Options	(%) Percentage of students
while reading at leisure	47
while reading for your studies	94
while writing for leisure	36
while writing for your studies	85
for vocabulary building	38
while playing word-games	15
for general interest	30
other (please specify)	3

Results show clearly that the majority of students use the dictionary for their studies and mostly during term time. Thus, the functions of the dictionary to the students are mainly instrumental.

From Question 15 onwards, questions refer only to the use of English monolingual dictionaries. Students were asked to state how often they looked up certain information in the dictionary: pronunciation, spelling, definitions, grammatical information, examples and notes on usage. It was found that the information most frequently looked up was definitions. 15 students answered *all the time*, 24 *very often* and 14 *quite often*; the second most frequent was spelling, 5 said *all the time*, 24 *very often* and 19 *quite often*. 31 students answered that they had never used information on pronunciation and 36 said the same for notes on usage. The remaining results are tabulated in Table 5.

**Table 5:**



15.1 = pronunciation    15.2 = spelling    15.3 = definitions    15.4 = grammatical information  
 15.5 = examples    15.6 = notes on usage

The majority of students (83%) answered that they would go through all the explanations of a polysemous word before they decided which was the most appropriate one to be used (Question 16) and most of them (76%) said the decision would be based on the example(s) given. 25% of the students would choose the explanation which they understood best whereas 17% of them would base the decision on the grammatical information provided (Question 17).

When asked whether they had been taught in the past how to use dictionaries in class to assist their learning of English, 68% answered no. Half of those who had learned how to use dictionaries said they had been taught how to use the sound symbols (IPA), 28% symbols which show grammatical information such as *V-adj*; and 20% the use of example(s) of a given word as reference for one's own writing.

What we have learned from the data is that the subjects do own dictionaries and many of them own more than one or one type of dictionary. Most students own both a monolingual and a bilingualised dictionary or one or more electronic pocket-sized dictionaries. Students have very positive attitudes towards the role of dictionaries in assisting their learning of English and they use dictionaries mainly for instrumental purposes, academic reading and writing. Though some of them claimed that they had been taught how to use the sound symbols, this remains one of the two pieces of dictionary information used least frequently by students. As in findings from other research, the definition is by far the most sought-after piece of information that students look up in dictionaries. Knowing that the majority of students would go through all the senses in a polysemous word entry before deciding which one best suits their needs was encouraging. However, using the examples or choosing the definition that they have understood best does make one wonder whether the choice is a reliable and well-informed one.

Most students had not learned how to use dictionaries in class to assist learning. Even though some claimed they had received training, the low frequencies in using information such as pronunciation, grammatical information and examples from the dictionary found in Question 15 seem to suggest that students had not learned, or had not been, using many of the skills they had learned in their study for various reasons. In both cases, there seems to be room for basic or further training on dictionary use.

## 5.2. Pre-test

One of the aims of holding the pre-test was to tap authentic data on students' knowledge in using the dictionary. Results of the test will be used first, to validate the data obtained from the previous questionnaire. Second, it was a diagnostic test which aimed at verifying the teaching material that had been prepared based on my teaching experience, intuition and lexicographical knowledge; the material would be changed and refined accordingly. Third, the test is to be used as a basis for comparison with the post-test results in order to find out whether students have acquired the skills being taught. Students were not informed in advance that they were going to have a test, and they were not given any dictionary to use during the test.

Two types of questions were asked in the test: the first type was related to information provided by a learner dictionary such as the sound symbols, grammatical information, the style label, etc. The second type of question focussed on language use such as British and American usage and culture-specific words. The test was done during normal lesson time.

There was no time limit given and students could leave the classroom as soon as they finished.

Initially, the data obtained from the pre-test have confirmed some of my beliefs and students' answers in the questionnaire. For example, of the four questions in a matching exercise where students were asked to link the word with the appropriate sound symbols, students got an average of one answer correct. Although some students claimed that they had received some training on using the symbols, the test results show that they have little knowledge in this area. Since students do not know the symbols well, it is no wonder the sound symbols were rated in the questionnaire as the least frequently looked-up piece of information.

There were questions set in the test which aimed at uncovering students' look-up strategies. For example, students were asked to write down the word they would look up while in search of the single words, compound words and idiomatic phrases given in the test. The majority of students would look up the verb in a phrasal verb combination such as *come* in *come round* (92%). In the case of compounds and semi-compounds, the choice of search word was quite dissimilar. Over 76% of students would look up the word *finger* for the compound *green finger*; 66% of students would look up *feeble* in *feeble-minded*, 26% for the word *mind*, 2 students would go for the word *minded* and one for the word *fee*. What is most interesting is that about 26% of the subjects would look up *think* for the meaning of the word *thoughtful*.

### 5.3. Treatment (explicit teaching)

Based on intuition, teaching experience and lexicographical knowledge; and with the results of the pre-test, I prepared and integrated teaching material on dictionary use into the course "An English Enhancement Programme". Meanwhile, however, due to a change in university policy, the hours of the course were cut from forty-two to twenty-eight. Although changes have been made to the teaching materials as well, the loss of time was greatly felt. The situation was worsened by intervening holidays and administration work that had to be handled in class time.

Changes have had to be made in order to achieve both the teaching goals and research aims. One of the crucial decisions made was to give up teaching students to use a bilingualised dictionary and the *BBI Combinatory Dictionary*. The reason used for giving up the former was that the material prepared already included the monolingual version of the bilingualised dictionary. As for the latter, since most learner's dictionaries include information on word collocation, the need to introduce this specialised dictionary seemed less urgent. As a result of the time constraints being imposed and the schedule of the course, the teaching of dictionary use started in the first lesson of week seven (see Appendix I).

### 5.4. Post-test and post-test questionnaire

The test and questionnaire were given to students during the last lesson of the course. As with the pre-test, students were not informed of the test and students from both the experimental and control groups were asked to finish the test during lesson time. There was no time restriction on the test: when a student finished the test, he or she would be asked to fill out the questionnaire immediately. During the test, a set of all the dictionaries that had been taught during the course was placed on students' table with each pair of students sharing a set. Students were told that they could use the dictionaries to do the test. No particular

encouragement or signal was given to students hinting whether they *should* use the dictionaries to complete the test.

### 5.5. The interview

A total of 16 students, coming from both the experimental and control groups, volunteered to be interviewed. The purpose of the interview is three-fold: first, to validate the answers or data students gave in the pre/post-tests and post-test questionnaire; second, to find out more information on how students approached and answered questions in the pre-test and post-test, in other words, the strategies they adopted in completing the tasks; and third, to seek students' comments on the interest level and usefulness of the dictionary use materials used in class.

Material writers or teachers of the English course will be interviewed separately to discuss the appropriateness and feasibility of integrating dictionary use material into the course.

## 6. Conclusion

The paper is a report on an on-going research project on teaching dictionary use by integrating the material into an English syllabus taught at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology. Some data have been reported and briefly discussed but the main focus of the paper has been on elucidating the purposes, background, and design of the research. A further report will provide a comprehensive discussion on the matters being discussed here. However, from the data obtained so far, an initial conclusion can be made, echoing Béjoint (1994: 168),

“The most efficient way to educate dictionary users is no doubt through the educational system, in class, as part of the normal curriculum. This is not much practised in educational establishments, but some experimental results indicate that it works”.

More research work should be focused on finding out how to teach dictionary use, including studies on teaching methodology and material design. It is only through working closely together that the three stakeholders in the lexicographical triangle can benefit from the reference book.

## 7. Note

<sup>1</sup> The majority of people in Hong Kong speak Cantonese, a variety widely spoken in southern China. Although there are many varieties of Chinese spoken all over China, the same written form of the language is shared by all. Chinese in Hong Kong it meant spoken Cantonese and written Chinese.

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## Appendix I:

### Teaching Plan

		Contents	Dictionary skills being integrated	Work to do/Assignments
Wk7 14/10	Les1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introducing the steps involved in writing a research paper               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-choosing a subject area</li> <li>-narrowing down the topic</li> <li>-doing library search</li> <li>-writing a central thesis</li> <li>-forming a title</li> </ul> </li> <li>● Introducing how to search for materials in a library</li> </ul>		
16/10	Les2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Setting a central thesis</li> <li>● Using directive words to set title</li> </ul>	Introduce learner's dictionaries to assist reading <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learner's vs general</li> <li>▪ introducing special features found in various learner's dictionaries</li> </ul>	
Wk8 21/10	Les1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Revising summary writing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Introduce typical arrangements of dictionary entries</li> </ul>	Bring to class photocopies of written sources and present them to the group for discussion on 6/11, second lesson of Wk 10
23/10	Les2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Introducing paraphrasing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Grammatical coding system</li> <li>▪ Compounds and derivatives</li> <li>▪ Language style - labels and collocations</li> </ul>	
Wk9 28/10	Les1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Revising paraphrasing and style in writing</li> <li>● Writing quotations and bibliography</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Practise using learner's dictionaries - finding directive words for in-text references</li> </ul>	Bring draft of Paper 1 to class for discussion on 11/11. Submission date for Paper 1 is 14/11
30/10	Les2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Structuring a paper - Introduction, Body and Conclusion</li> </ul>		