European Dictionary Culture.
The Exeter Case Study of Dictionary Use among University Students,
against the Wider Context
of the Reports and Recommendations
of the Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages
(1996-1999)

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Abstract

Against the context of the TNP in the Area of Languages, a European-Union financed consortium aimed at improving language learning in higher education, the paper reports on the results of a survey of dictionary use among students across the University of Exeter. Data collected by questionnaire and interviews during the 1998-1999 session and supplemented by tests carried out during the 1999-2000 session are analysed in terms of the students' dictionary awareness and the wider implications for the teaching of reference skills. The overriding impression that reference provision and reference proficiency in this University is still (too) low leads to the conclusion that more attention should be paid to deliberate instruction in the appropriate skills, provided that these can be specified.

1 Background

Of all the specialisations in dictionary research (Hartmann forthcoming), it is the so-called 'user perspective' that has made a significant contribution to our knowledge about the reference needs and reference skills of dictionary users. User research of this kind can provide answers to such questions as: Who owns which kinds of reference works? Is ownership a sufficient condition for successful use? What information categories are offered in dictionaries, and how do users get at them? What are the requirements of successful consultation? Can the appropriate strategies be taught? How user-friendly are today's reference works?

Thanks to such publications as Atkins (1998) and Wiegand (1998), it has become a little easier to survey what is known about dictionary use. However, the need for more empirical studies is still as urgent as ever, and at Exeter we have been actively encouraging such research for a few years. Examples of such projects are the doctoral theses by Diab (1989) and Li (1998) which investigated dictionary use among nurses in a Jordanian teaching hospital and among students in a Chinese university of technology, respectively. And collaborative projects by M.A. students have explored such topics as: What would be the demand for and requirements of a dictionary of the University of Exeter? How well known is the genre of the bilingualised dictionary among language learners? and What might be the expectations among potential users of a 'Dictionary of Lexicography' or a new Website for the Dictionary Research Centre?

2   The Exeter case study

The European-Union funded Consortium 'Thematic Network Project in the Area of Languages' (1996-99), in the Group concerned with Dictionaries (chaired by myself), had detected and deplored a relatively low level of 'dictionary awareness' among university teachers and students of Modern Languages and a lack of empirical evidence on the use of dictionaries and other reference works in higher education. Thus I was fortunate in 1998, at just the right time for the purposes of the TNP Sub-Project 9, to obtain a research grant which enabled me to collect appropriate data towards a profile of British university students as dictionary users by means of a survey of the whole range of issues across several departmental and faculty boundaries.

The project was entitled 'University Reference Skills: A Case Study of Dictionary Use in Higher Education', and its declared main aim was to 'collect valuable data about levels of reference provision and reference proficiency in several Schools and Services at our University, by a combination of student-based questionnaires and staff-based interviews'. This made it an inter-disciplinary investigation, with important local implications for teaching quality and national and international implications for assessing and comparing dictionary awareness.

The work would be spread over the whole 1998-99 academic year, but the bulk of the empirical survey was to be carried out in the autumn term 1998 so that preliminary findings could be presented at a workshop held in January 1999 which had been planned to coincide with the Exeter meeting of the Scientific Committee of the TNP Sub-Project 9 on Dictionaries. The latter had already declared, in its 1997 Interim Report, that 'findings from user studies suggest a surprising indifference among staff and students to the availability and usefulness of various kinds of reference works'.

The Exeter survey was therefore both timely and welcome. Supported by regular and minuted meetings (eight were held between 2 September 1998 and 12 January 1999, and a further five in the period up to 24 June 1999), the Project Group first considered a draft questionnaire (prepared by Lan Li on the basis of her own Exeter Ph.D. on dictionary use in China) which incorporated a number of items previously investigated by others and, after piloting it with over 100 students in the English Language Centre, modified it several times, confirming Wiegand's (1998) experience with the elaboration of a questionnaire progressively refined by a Heidelberg project team.

Version 4 of the 30-item Exeter questionnaire was then distributed between late October and mid-November 1998 to large numbers of both undergraduate and postgraduate students (a sample of just over 2,000 or nearly a fifth of the total student population) in five groups of departments (School of Business & Economics, School of Education, School of Engineering & Computer Science, School of English, and School of Modern Languages) and two Centres (Foreign Language Centre and English Language Centre). The questionnaire survey was supplemented by 17 interviews with representatives of the staff in these departments, schools and centres.

3   Results of the questionnaire survey and interviews

The response rate of 35% (710 completed questionnaires out of a total of 2,040 distributed) was satisfactory, but it varied considerably from one department to another (German 81.7%, Business & Economics 15.8%).

3.1   The sample (Questions 1 to 5)

The distribution of subjects by sex, age, language(s) and study level was as expected, reflecting a male to female student ratio of 39.7% to 60.3%, who are predominantly under 25 years old, over 80% native speakers of English, with some declared proficiency in the major European languages taught in Britain (83.7% French, 51.4% German and 38.5% Spanish), ranging over several levels of study (1st year 20.7%, 2nd year 24.9%, 3rd year 12.5% and 4th year 12.3%, plus smaller numbers of postgraduates). The following 5 subject groups were represented: English 20.0%, Modern Languages (French/German/Spanish/Italian/Russian) 29.4%, Business & Economics 8.5%, Education 16.9%, Engineering & Computer Science 18.3%, other (including English Language Centre) 5.9%. The relative predominance of Modern Languages over the other Schools turned out to be an advantage for the purposes of this project, as we were particularly interested in eliciting data for dictionary awareness levels among students under the aegis of the TNP in the Area of Languages.

3.2   First dictionary use, purchase and ownership (Q. 6 to 15)

The great majority of the students had started to use dictionaries at primary school (72.5%) rather than secondary school (25.8%), but ownership is associated with later stages (acquisition at primary school 39.9%, secondary school 49.2%, further education 4.1%, university 3.9%). Most students own a general monolingual dictionary (94.7%), many have bilingual dictionaries (77.2%, especially those studying Modern Languages), a surprisingly large proportion own a thesaurus (66.2%), while encyclopedias and special-subject dictionaries are owned by fewer students (40.5% and 37.8%). Less than a third have access to electronic dictionaries. Many own several dictionaries; the unexpectedly high average of 5.9 tends to vary more by age, native language and subject studied than by sex. Their choice and purchase seems to depend more on personal preferences than on tutor recommendations, with relevance to their own needs being a higher priority than price and portability.

In terms of use, the general English dictionary dominates (over 50%, especially among students of English, Education and Science) over the bilingual dictionary (less than 40%, especially in Modern Languages and to a lesser extent Education); both by far outstrip the thesaurus (5%), the special-subject dictionary (4%) and the encyclopedia (1%). When asked to remember details about their own favourite dictionary, 80.2% can recall its title, 76.1% its colour, 62.3% its publisher, but many have difficulties with names of editors, size and other publication specifics.

3.3   Dictionary awareness, contexts and frequency of use (Q. 16 to 21)

That dictionary awareness can often be less than satisfactory has been diagnosed by other studies. Our survey confirmed this, e.g. by the two findings that (a) information contained in the appendices of dictionaries is rarely consulted and (b) 70.9% of the respondents admit that they manage without front-matter guidance notes altogether. Dictionary awareness tends to be greater among foreign rather than English students, and avoidance more pronounced in Science than Arts students.

Dictionary use is associated with study at home (97.7%) and in the library (58.6%) rather than the classroom and other contexts, and conditioned by work-related writing activities (e.g. writ-

ten assignments 91.2%, reading textbooks 68.3%, translation exercises 60.0%) rather than other reading and entertainment. Meanings and spellings of words are much more frequently looked up than grammar, pronunciation and etymology, encyclopedic information is in much less demand than lexical detail.

3.4   The joys and difficulties of dictionary use (Q. 22 to 27)

When asked whether they are satisfied with their ability to use a dictionary, 90.6% of the respondents answered 'yes', which may suggest an exaggerated feeling of self-confidence that needs to be related to such issues as ignoring other people's advice on purchasing a dictionary, managing without the guidance provided by the dictionary and blaming the dictionary rather than themselves for any difficulties (e.g. with technical terms). In view of this, we were surprised by the frequently stated opinion that dictionary use is 'informative' (rather than 'not worth the trouble') and 'easy' (rather than 'difficult'), and that dictionaries are seen to benefit study skills (such as writing and reading).

3.5   Skills training and other matters (Q. 28 to 30)

Two questions explicitly addressed the issue of instruction in reference skills. 34.6% of the students had never been taught how to use a dictionary, and over 60% felt that it would be '(very) important' to be taught. It would make sense, therefore, to build on the students' own assessment and review current teaching arrangements in departments, schools and centres in an effort to raise dictionary awareness across the whole university. Only 22% of the respondents took advantage of the opportunity in the final question to add some personal comments. These were generally favourable towards dictionaries, although there were a small number which contain jocular and critical points.

The questionnaire is not the only method of collecting evidence on dictionary use (in Hartmann 1989 I list 20 such empirical studies under 7 sub-headings; many more are annotated in the bibliography by Dolezal & McCreary 1999). There is, above all, a need for more 'direct observation' by means of test, quiz and protocol approaches. This issue will be pursued in Section 4 below; meanwhile a brief report is offered here on the results of interviews which I conducted with representative members of staff from 12 departments, two language centres and three other Exeter University units (Arts Computing, Examinations Office and the University Library).

When asked about problems with dictionary use, most interviewees could not recall many. Dictionaries and other reference works do not figure prominently in staff meetings, they are rarely part of a departmental policy, or specified in student handbooks or module descriptions. In this latter respect, the School of Modern Languages has devoted more attention to the subject of dictionaries than other sections of the University. When pressed, interviewees remember occasions where such practices have led to tutorial help given to individuals or seminar groups, but the comment recurred, even among language tutors, that 'dictionaries are taken for granted' (Librarian), or 'dictionary use is not a priority' (Education), and deliberate instruction is (therefore?) not generally provided except where it may form part of a course in Linguistics (e.g. Spanish) or Lexicography (postgraduate programme in English).

The interviews complement the results of the questionnaire survey. On the assumption that the nominated staff members are representative, they show a wide range of views from interest to indifference. They generally have an open mind towards dictionaries and other reference works, but do not consider them a major problem and therefore part of normal departmental policy. When difficulties arise, they tend to be met by occasional personal guidance rather than systematic instruction, although a minority (especially in Modern Languages) admit the possibility of change, particularly if the questionnaire results of this project should suggest a case for it. Areas for such action might be the specification of the role of particular types of dictionaries (and other reference works) in module descriptions, handbooks and book-lists, and an evaluation of the links (at staff, postgraduate and undergraduate levels) with the Library, the Examinations Office and I.T. Services.

4   Results of direct observation

At the start of the 1999-2000 session, the Project Group which included M.A. students in Lexicography decided to supplement the results of the questionnaire survey and the interviews by gathering empirical data from a Dictionary Test. Based on a set of reference skills (selected from 40 specified by Nesi 1999 under such headings as 'before dictionary consultation', 'locating entry information', 'interpreting entry information' and 'recording entry information'), an entirely new test was drafted and piloted on a group of teacher training students in the School of Education at Exeter University.

It consists of three parts:

1. A self-assessment of reference skills
   ('how well do you think you will do without dictionary consultation?'),

2. a quiz of look-up skills while referring to a particular dictionary
   ('where did you look up X, and what did you find?), and

3. a chance to reflect on the exercise ('how well do you think you did?).

Parts 1 and 2 contain 10 questions each on Spelling, Meaning, Pronunciation, Stress, Morphology, Usage Labels, Idioms, Word Origins, Collocations and Parts of Speech.

The results of the data analysis were used to modify the test which was then administered on (8) students on the University Certificate Course in English Language and Literature and two groups of pupils (of about 20 each) at two secondary schools in Dorset and Devon. A version of the test has also been made available on the Website of the Dictionary Research Centre at Exeter to elicit further data from volunteers responding from around the world[1].

5   Implications for the wider TNP context

These preliminary results are encouraging in their breadth, complexity and direction. Although response rates, coverage and administration of the questionnaire varied considerably across

the constituent units and correlations between indirect and direct observation have yet to be established, a mass of data has emerged which gives food for thought.

Many of the results had been expected (such as the relative indifference to questions of dictionary use among some staff and the indirect evidence of low dictionary competence among many students), but many also surprised us (such as the high degree of user self-confidence in the face of dictionary difficulties). We were heartened by the students' recognition that some teaching of reference skills might be helpful and the willingness among staff to consider changes in the way dictionaries and other reference works might be treated in various study programmes in the future.

The overriding impression that reference provision and reference proficiency in this University is still (too) low leads us inevitably to ask what the implications of this conclusion might be. Locally, the implication is that more attention should be paid to deliberate instruction in the basic tools and skills of information-gathering via reference books (and I.T. systems). Nationally, an attempt should be made to see whether the Exeter 'reference profile' could - and should - be generalized: what are the benchmarks on the basis of which such comparisons can be made?

Finally, we need to ask about the international implications of the Exeter case study. Most of the 13 National Reports on the dictionary scene in European Union countries that had been compiled for the purposes of the TNP Sub-Project 9 (Hartmann 1999) suggest that much remains to be done to improve the conditions of dictionary-making and dictionary use. To these, the Exeter survey adds concrete and representative data. It also contributes substantially to the debate on the more specific problems addressed in some of the (8) Thematic Reports, e.g. on how to specify and teach the required reference skills to university students of languages. Lastly, it adds weight to the final Recommendations (the first of two sets; ibid. p. 4):

> Research into dictionary use should provide the framework for all lexicographic production, and more such research will be needed if the level of dictionary awareness is to be raised and the teaching of reference skills is to be improved.

It is to be hoped that the subject of user training will receive more attention in future within the wider ambit of dictionary research and pedagogical lexicography (Hartmann forthcoming, esp. Section 6.2.6). The papers edited by Kühn (1999) in the thematic issue 14/1998 of *Lexicographica International Annual* point the way in the right direction.

Notes

[1]At the time of submitting this paper for the proceedings, the data obtained have not yet been processed, but a preliminary look at a selection of the responses confirms the impressions summarised in Section 3 above.

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