Dictionaries for University Students:
A Real Deal or Merely a Marketing Ploy?

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Universities in English-speaking countries have experienced a sharp rise in the number of students in the past decades. One of the biggest problems students face is learning how to communicate in academic English, a language they have not experienced before. One of the tools that students often use to tackle language-related problems during their study is a dictionary. There are many dictionaries on the market, but only a few claim to be designed specifically for university students. This paper takes a closer look at these few dictionaries, and attempts to identify their unique features by comparing them with general dictionaries. The analysis reveals that the only real difference lies in the additional material-e.g. sections on academic writing, and not in the dictionary macrostructure or microstructure itself. The second part of the paper focuses on some of the features that dictionaries for university students share with general dictionaries, such as being based on corpus data, and discusses why many of these features cannot actually be acknowledged as student-friendly. The final remarks point out that publishers, researchers, and lexicographers need to acknowledge that students are a specific group of dictionary users-users that need help, not only with regard to general language, but also with academic language.

1. Introduction

The number of students at universities where English is the language of instruction has increased dramatically in the past decades. For example, in 2005, there were almost 19 million students studying at universities in the four largest English-speaking countries (US, UK, Australia, and Canada), which was more than six times more than in 1955.

All these students have one important thing in common—they are all non-native speakers of academic English. In other words, they need to acquire the relevant skills before participating effectively in academic discourse. Dictionaries play an important role in this process as students often rely on them when dealing with academic vocabulary.

There is a plethora of monolingual English dictionaries on the market,[1] however only a few of them claim to specifically target university students. Each dictionary for university students selects its own set of features, which have ostensibly been designed specifically for student; however, one feature that is found in almost every student dictionary is a section on academic writing. Of course, many non-student dictionaries, e.g. advanced learner's dictionaries, also contain a section on academic writing, or other features that may be useful for students, but the main target users of these dictionaries are not specifically university students.

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[1] This article focuses on monolingual English dictionaries, as there is no escaping the fact that any non-native speaker student is likely to possess a bilingual dictionary long before purchasing a monolingual English dictionary. And even then, it cannot be expected that the bilingual dictionary will simply be discarded; for certain activities, such as translation, it is much more effective. However, there is no need to choose between the two types of dictionary; as Baxter (1980: 335) argues, "a judicious combination of the two would be the most productive".

2. University students and monolingual dictionaries

2.1. Dictionaries for university students

American lexicography has been producing dictionaries for students—called college dictionaries—since the 1940s. The dictionaries display the encyclopaedic features of other American dictionaries, but focus on the present day language (Béjoint 2000) and include many scientific and technical terms. College dictionaries are aimed at native-speaking college students, and have a lot of the features of native-speaker dictionaries in general. Nevertheless, at US colleges and universities, these dictionaries are equally used by non-native speaker students, but not necessarily by choice (McCreary and Dolezal 1999).

In Great Britain, on the other hand, dictionaries for university students have a relatively short tradition.[2] Unlike their US counterparts, UK publishers have acknowledged the differences between the needs of native speaker students and non-native speaker students, and produce dictionaries aimed at each group. The latest additions to dictionaries for university students are the Compact Oxford English Dictionary for University and College Students (COEDUCS), aimed at native-speakers, and the Longman Exams Dictionary (LED), aimed at non-native speakers. LED represents a milestone in lexicography, as it is the first dictionary to make use of an academic word list (the New Academic Word List by Coxhead 2000).

As there are other, often more established, monolingual dictionaries on the market, one cannot expect that students will use only dictionaries for university students. In fact, the reality, especially in the UK, is quite the opposite—students use anything but the dictionaries targeted at them. This is discussed in the next section.

2.2. Which dictionaries are students actually using?

Students in the US are likely to own, but not necessarily regularly use, at least one college dictionary as "English departments in the US typically require that students… buy a mandated dictionary, or choose one from a list of dictionaries, commonly known as 'college dictionaries', for the freshman (1st year) composition course"[3] (McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 108). The list of dictionaries often includes comprehensive native-speaker dictionaries, such as the American Heritage Dictionary. It is noteworthy that no distinction is made between native speaker students and non-native speaker students.

Although UK universities do not use the same prescriptive approach to dictionary use as their US counterparts, research by Nesi and Haill (2002) shows that, although learners' dictionaries are the preferred option, native-speaker dictionaries are also used by a large number of non-native speaker students.

Very little is known about the dictionary ownership of native speaker students in the UK. This can be partly attributed to the fact that the dictionary usage of English language learners seem to be far most interesting to researchers. On the other hand, one could see this as a proof that both lexicographers and researchers seem to think that the needs of native speaker students are already catered for.

In order to get more information on the ownership/use of monolingual English dictionaries among both native speaker and non-native speaker students, I decided to conduct a survey at Aston University. The survey was administered online using the Bristol Online Surveys tool in the period between November 2007 and March 2008. The survey was completed by 620 students from all four Aston Schools—449 native speakers and 171 non-native speakers. The students ranged from first-year undergraduates to PhD researchers, and the proportion of native-speaker and non-native speaker respondents was fairly similar for each of these levels.

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[2] These dictionaries should not be confused with student's dictionaries, which have been around for some time, but are targeted at students in secondary schools.

[3] A "freshman composition course" is a required writing course for all students at any college or university in the US.

Table 1 shows the most frequently used dictionaries by native speaker students[4]. Although the list is dominated by dictionaries published by HarperCollins and Oxford University Press, by far the most popular dictionary (or rather an online collection of dictionaries) is Dictionary.com. Clearly, the internet has become an important reference source for university students. This is also supported by the fact that Google was named by 15 students (students use "define: X" command to get the definition of the word).

Native speaker students	
Dictionary.com	80
New Oxford Dictionary Of English	26
Collins English Dictionary	20
Oxford English Dictionary	20
Oxford dictionary (various)	17
Google	15
Concise Oxford English Dictionary	14
Oxford Dictionary of English	11
Collins dictionary (various)	9
Compact Oxford English Dictionary	8
Collins Gem English Dictionary	7

Table 1. Dictionaries most frequently used by native speaker students.

The list of dictionaries most frequently used by non-native speaker students (Table 2) contains many (native-speaker) dictionaries that were named also by the native speaker students, confirming the aforementioned finding by Nesi and Haill (2002). Noticeable additions are the three advanced learner's dictionaries, with the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary being the most popular dictionary among non-native speaker students. It is also noteworthy that Dictionary.com is quite popular, albeit not to the same degree as among the native speakers.

Non-native speaker students	
Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary	17
Dictionary.com	16
Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English	10
Oxford Dictionary of English	10
New Oxford Dictionary of English	9
Oxford dictionary (various)	9
Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary	8
Collins English Dictionary	8
Concise Oxford English Dictionary	4
Collins (various)	3
Wikipedia	3

Table 2. Dictionaries most frequently used by non-native speaker students.

[4] A threshold of 1.5% of the number of the respondents was set as a cut-off point in both dictionary lists.

There were more than 100 other different dictionaries mentioned by students, but many of them were reported only once or twice. Among them were dictionaries for university students – the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary (2 students), COEDUCS (1 student), and LED (1 student). However, as dictionaries for university students have only recently appeared in the UK, these results are not all that surprising.

3. What is special about dictionaries for university students?

Dictionaries for university students seem to be relatively unknown to students in general, with the exception of the USA, where they are "introduced" to students by their universities. But the question is whether these dictionaries *should* be used by students. They are supposedly targeted at students, but do their macro- and microstructures reflect that? What distinguishes dictionaries for university students from general-purpose dictionaries?

In order to determine that, entries from three dictionaries for university students (the Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary (MWCD), COEDUCS, and LED) were compared with corresponding entries in general-purpose dictionaries.

Firstly, MWCD (representing American college dictionaries) was compared with the unabridged edition of Webster's Third New International Dictionary (W3). The noun entry for *progress* was selected for this comparison. The MWCD entry (Figure 1) is merely a shortened version of the W3 entry (Figure 2); certain (sub)senses have been omitted, a few definitions have been shortened and all the examples have been removed (greyed out text). The only new text is a slightly modified definition of subsense b under sense 1 (underlined).

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1 a (1) **:** a royal journey or tour marked by pomp and pageant <a staff of clerks accompanied the king on his *progresses* -- F.M.Stenton> (2) **:** a state procession <at last all was ready for my *progress* -- George VI> **b : an official journey or circuit** <these men of law ... on a *progress* from court to court -- Van Wyck Brooks> **c :** a journeying forward **:** an expedition, journey, or march through a region **: TOUR** <balls, dinners and crowds of beautiful women attended his *progress* -- *Time*>
2 a : an advance or movement to an objective or toward a goal **:** purposeful getting or going ahead <when impeded in their *progress*, these people suddenly ceased muttering -- E.A.Poe> <a fishing boat made a slow *progress* -- Elizabeth Bowen> <*progress* to the presidency and chairmanship of the board -- *Current Biography*> **b :** a movement onward (as in time or space) **:** a forward course **: PROGRESSION** <the daily *progress* of the sun> <the *progress* of a disease> <we make *progress* -- we pass from night to morning -- Edmund Wilson>
3 *Scots law* **:** succession in right to a feudal estate **:** the abstract of title with the deeds evidencing such succession
4 a : the action or process of advancing or improving by marked stages or degrees **:** gradual betterment; *especially* **:** the progressive development or evolution of mankind <there was a general belief in inevitable and universal *progress* -- John Berger> <found in civil law principles ... the analogies that were needed to smooth the path of *progress* -- B.N.Cardozo> **b :** a theory that change from old to new is essential to progress
- in progress : going on **: OCCURRING** <entertained troops ... while the fighting was still *in progress* -- *Current Biography*> <with the beginning of healing already *in progress* -- Morris Fishbein>

Figure 1. The noun entry for *progress* in the *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*

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1 a (1) : a royal journey marked by pomp and pageant (2) : a state procession
<u>b : a tour or circuit made by an official (as a judge)</u> c : an expedition, journey, or march through a region
2 : a forward or onward movement (as to an objective or to a goal) : ADVANCE
3 : gradual betterment; especially   : the progressive development of mankind
–in progress : going on : OCCURRING

Figure 2. The noun entry *progress* in the *Merriam-Webster 11th Collegiate Dictionary*

Whereas MWCD derives its entries from a much larger W3 (MWCD—165,000 entries; W3—470,000 entries), COEDUCS and its apparent source (the Compact Oxford Dictionary of Current English (CODCE)), contain practically the same number of "words, phrases, and definitions"[5]. Figures 3 and 4 show the entry for *choice* in both dictionaries.

> **noun 1** an act of choosing. **2** the right or ability to choose. **3** a range from which to choose. **4 something chosen.**
>
> **adjective 1** of very good quality. **2** (of language) rude and abusive.
>
> — ORIGIN from Old French *chois*, from *choisir* 'choose'.

Figure 3. The entry for *choice* in the *Compact Oxford Dictionary of Current English*

> **noun 1** an act of choosing. **2** the right or ability to choose. **3** a range from which to choose: *a menu offering a wide choice of dishes.* **4** a person or thing that has or can be chosen: *this disk drive is the perfect choice for your computer.*
>
> **adjective 1** of very good quality. **2** (of language) rude and abusive.
>
> – PHRASES **of choice** chosen as one's favourite or the best: *champagne was his drink of choice.*
>
> – ORIGIN Old French chois.

Figure 4. The entry for *choice in* the *Compact Oxford English Dictionary for University and College Students*

The entries contain identical definitions, with the exception of definition for sense 4 under the noun part of the entry. COEDUCS offers its users additional, seemingly useful features, such as examples and a phrase. And while this deserves praise, a closer analysis of the examples reveals that they do not reflect the real language. For example, *the perfect choice for your computer* in the example under sense 4 cannot be found in the BNC or the Bank of English, while an internet search produced only 3 hits, two of them with *the perfect choice for your computer needs.* In addition, BNC and Bank of English do not contain any examples of the phrase *the perfect choice for* followed by a possessive determiner. And the other examples (*a menu offering a wide choice of dishes; champagne was his drink of choice*) do not seem particularly useful for academic purposes.

Finally, the Longman Exams Dictionary was compared to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE), its well-known "advanced learners'" predecessor. The selection of the entry for comparison was slightly less random than in the previous two comparisons. As LED advertises the use of the Academic Word List (Coxhead 2000) as one of its unique features, the entry for the verb *abandon* (Figure 5), the first word labelled as academic in the dictionary, was chosen for comparison of the two dictionaries.

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[5] COEDUCS contains over 144,000 words, phrases, and definitions; CODCE contains 145,000 words, phrases, and definitions (*www.askoxford.com*).

abandon¹ *verb* `W 3` `AC`

1 to leave someone, especially someone you are responsible for ➜ **abandoned:**

How could she abandon her own child?

2 to go away from a place, vehicle etc permanently, especially because the situation

makes it impossible for you to stay SYNONYM **leave;** ↪ **abandoned:**

  We had to abandon the car and walk the rest of the way.

  Fearing further attacks, most of the population had abandoned the city.

3 to stop doing something because there are too many problems and it is impossible to continue:

  The game had to be abandoned due to bad weather.

  They **abandoned** *their* **attempt** *to recapture the castle.*

  Because of the fog they **abandoned** *their* **idea** *of driving.*

  a refusal to abandon nuclear arms development

4 to stop having a particular idea, belief, or attitude:

  They were accused of abandoning their socialist principles.

  Rescuers had **abandoned** *all* **hope** *of finding any more survivors.*

  Education leaders do not want to abandon California's commitment to affordable

  college education.

5 **abandon yourself to something** *literary* to feel an emotion so strongly that you let it control you completely:

  She abandoned herself to grief.

6 **abandon ship** to leave a ship because it is sinking

—**abandonment** *noun* [uncountable]

Figure 5. The verb entry *abandon* in the Longman Exams Dictionary.

The entry in LED is almost an exact copy of the entry in LDOCE (greyed out text is shared by both dictionaries), with the following minor additions/changes: the label AC (denoting academic use), two links to a related word (*abandoned*), the label "synonym" (in LDOCE, the sign = is used), and two additional examples.

These comparisons point to the fact that dictionaries for university students are nothing more than a poorly adapted version of general-purpose dictionaries. An indication of the differences between both dictionary types is found in the publishers' promotional material, which puts more emphasis on additional material (sections on academic writing, how to write a CV, etc), rather than on dictionary macrostructure and microstructure.

4. Issues of existing dictionaries that students use

It has been established that there are not any major differences between dictionaries for students and general-purpose dictionaries. But while the previous section focussed on the differences between the two groups of dictionaries, it is now time to look at some of the shared features, and determine whether their inclusion in dictionaries for students is justified.

4.1. *Corpus-based*

Corpus-based dictionaries have now become the norm in modern lexicography (Kilgarriff 2000). Lexicographers use corpora to obtain information on the frequency of words and phrases, to discover their meanings, and to find examples of authentic usage. But corpora used by dictionary-makers reflect general English, and not academic English. And although academic texts are found in any general English corpora, they are often incomplete, and suffer from a lack of representativeness (Thompson, 2006). As a result, academic words (or to be more exact, academic word meanings) have a less prominent role.

4.2. *Coverage*

The coverage in dictionaries for university students is significantly reduced, when compared with comprehensive general-purpose dictionaries. This can be positive for students, as obsolete words and meanings are excluded. However, the negative aspect is that many technical terms and meanings are not offered. Furthermore, as frequency is likely to be a key factor in deciding which word or sense to exclude, many academic uses of the words may not be covered by a dictionary for university students due to the non-academic nature of most of the corpus data.

4.3. *Sense ordering*

Considering the prevalence of the "choose the first definition" strategy by users (Mitchell 1983; Tono 1984; Neubach and Cohen 1988; McCreary 2002; Nesi and Haill 2002), word senses in a dictionary for university students should be ordered by their significance/prominence in academic language. But senses in general-purpose dictionaries are ordered according to the information from general corpora, which does not translate into a user-friendly feature for students.

As already mentioned, the verb entry *abandon* in LED contains two extra examples in comparison with LDOCE. Examples were added to senses 3 and 4; if this is an indication of the importance of those senses in academic English, why are those senses not offered as senses 1 and 2? Also, if those are the academic senses of the verb *abandon*, the label AC should be placed only in front of those senses.

Even less student-friendly is MWCD, which retains the historical sense ordering of W3, with the oldest sense given first.

4.4. *Definitions*

Definitions are another feature that is left almost unchanged. Whenever a change is made, definitions usually become shorter. Students are therefore seen as having the same language competence, if not even higher, than the users of general-purpose dictionaries.

4.5. *Examples*

Examples are an important companion to definitions, so one would expect to find more of them in a dictionary for university students. Thus, it is difficult to understand why the makers of MCDE decided to omit all the examples, especially in view of the fact that the definitions are already rather brief.

COEDUCS, on the other hand, has enriched CODCE entries with examples. Unfortunately, the examples do not seem to be corpus-based, which decreases their value. The entry *choice* reveals another potential issue—why are examples not offered for the first two noun senses? The first senses are more important (why would they otherwise be offered first?) and, in this particular case, the cryptic definition under noun sense 1, "an act of choosing", could definitely benefit from an example or two.

A quick overview of a few core dictionary features has shown that general-purpose dictionaries are not a good basis for dictionaries for university students. Dictionaries describe language, and rely on corpora for information. Hence, a corpus of academic language, and not general language, is an essential prerequisite for a quality dictionary for university students.

5. Conclusion

Dictionaries for university students are no more than a spin-off of general-purpose dictionaries. This probably means that no significant lexicographic effort has been put into the creation of the dictionary for students. Publishers clearly do not consider university students as a group of dictionary users with their own specific needs.

Nevertheless, publishers are not the only ones who deserve criticism for not recognizing students as users of monolingual dictionaries in their own right. Researchers have conducted numerous studies into monolingual dictionary use, and have often used university students as their subjects (e.g. Béjoint 1981, Battenburg 1989, Nesi 2000); however few studies have focussed on the needs of students as users of academic English (e.g. Nesi and Haill 2002).

Lexicographers seem to share the opinion that existing dictionaries adequately cater to the needs of university students. Only a few authors (Hollósy 1988, De Cock 2006, Williams 2006)[6] acknowledge that a more academically-oriented dictionary is needed. While De Cock (2006) and Williams (2006) see the solution in adapting existing advanced learner's dictionaries, Hollósy (1988) is the only one, at least to this author's knowledge, who proposes the creation of a completely new dictionary of academic English.

Students need a dictionary that reflects academic language. Such a dictionary has to be based on a corpus of academic language, and not general language. But in order for this to become a reality, researchers, lexicographers, and, most importantly, publishers will need to first of all acknowledge that students are a unique group of dictionary users.

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[6] It should be pointed out, though, that these three authors focus on the needs of non-native speaker students.

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