

Pedagogical Criteria for Effective Foreign Language Learning: A New Dictionary Model

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This paper presents the pedagogical criteria used in the making of the Easy English Dictionary with a Catalan-English Vocabulary (EED), a new dictionary model for lower intermediate learners of English as a foreign language. The dictionary described renders an account of the philosophy and the results of a specific lexicographical project centred on English as the L2 and Catalan as the L1. The pedagogical criteria on which the EED is based are: structural criteria, linguistic criteria, cultural criteria and illustration criteria. The paper examines the treatment that each of these four aspects has received in different types of dictionary and, after pointing out their weaknesses and limitations, proposes a new dictionary model that seeks to promote a more effective learning of foreign languages. The most innovative aspect of the EED concerns its structure: the EED is a bilingualized dictionary-i.e. it combines the advantages of both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries, but unlike in classical, immediate bilingualized dictionaries, in the new-deferred-dictionary model the L1 translation does not minimize the L2 definition. The EED also takes advantage of the L1 language and culture, something which the vast majority of dictionaries for L2 learning do not do: the new model uses L2 words similar to L1 ones as well as cultural referents familiar to the L2 learner. Finally, the new dictionary model presented in this paper considers illustrations as an important means of contextualization and linguistic production.

1. Introduction: bilingualized dictionaries

In the field of foreign language learning, and more specifically in the field of learning English as a foreign language (EFL), a lot of pedagogical progress has been made since bilingual dictionaries limited themselves to offering mere lists of totally decontextualized (and therefore arbitrary) equivalents, where it was impossible to make informed choices between the different translations of a single word. Fortunately for EFL learners, in the last decades new, more effective lexicographic resources have appeared (on the evolution and typology of EFL dictionaries, see Cowie 2003).

A dictionary that represented a pedagogical breakthrough was the *Oxford Student's Dictionary for Hebrew Speakers* (OSDHS). According to Laufer and Kimmel (1997: 363), the OSDHS inaugurated a new category of dictionaries, namely *bilingualized dictionaries*. Bilingualized dictionaries are hybrids insofar as they integrate a monolingual dictionary and two bilingual dictionaries: they typically contain a monolingual definition and an example in the foreign language (monolingual L2 dictionary) immediately followed by a translation (which acts as a bilingual L2 → L1 dictionary), plus a bilingual section (L1 → L2 dictionary) at the end which provides a list of foreign words with their corresponding translations (on bilingualized dictionaries, see Hartmann 1993, Kernerman 1994 and Nakamoto 1995; for a list and a description of several bilingualized dictionaries, see Hartmann, 1994: 207, 210, 216, 218-220).

Bilingualized dictionaries bridge the gap between monolingual and bilingual dictionaries: monolingual dictionaries immerse learners in the second language, but, especially at elementary levels, raise frustration among users, who often cannot understand the definitions. Bilingual dictionaries, on the other hand, provide immediate access to the learner's native language and are therefore essential when the student does not know how to say a word in the foreign

language. Bilingual dictionaries, then, generate confidence in the user, even though they do not immerse learners in the foreign language as much as monolinguals do. Having both kinds of dictionary in one seems the ideal solution. In actual fact, bilingualized dictionaries were conceived to encourage the learners' autonomy in the use of the monolingual dictionary: according to the makers of bilingualized dictionaries, users of this type of dictionary look up the foreign word in the monolingual dictionary and, if they do not understand the definition, they then look up the translation (K Dictionaries: "Concept" section).

Even though bilingualized dictionaries were created to promote autonomy in the use of the monolingual dictionary, they have a series of shortcomings which have not been pointed out in the current bibliography (on the effectiveness of monolingual, bilingual and bilingualized dictionaries, see Fan 2000: 124-126 and Laufer and Hadar 1997). First of all, most of them are aimed at upper intermediate or advanced learners of EFL, which is not a shortcoming per se, but it is when viewed in context: there are no bilingualized dictionaries aimed at lower intermediate EFL learners. Most important, though, is the fact that these bilingualized dictionaries have been conceived of, designed and written in such a way that they are still based on a rather passive reception of knowledge rather than on meaningful learning—the most important characteristic of meaningful learning is the fact that students learn by relating the new information to information already known, with the result that previous knowledge becomes modified and updated (on meaningful learning, see Ausubel 2000 and Ausubel, Novak and Hanesian 1978).

2. A new dictionary model

In order to surmount the shortcomings of classical bilingualized dictionaries, a team of lexicographers and EFL teachers devised a new dictionary model: the *print deferred bilingualized dictionary* (Pujol, Corrius and Masnou 2006). This materialized in a particular dictionary: the *Easy English Dictionary with a Catalan-English Vocabulary* (EED). This dictionary is aimed at Catalan lower intermediate learners of English, mostly those who are in the upper stages of primary education and in secondary education.

In the rest of the paper we will present this new kind of dictionary with the aim of providing both lexicographers and the EFL community with a new tool that can improve the students' learning of a foreign language both inside and outside the classroom. We will concentrate on the main pedagogical criteria underlying the new dictionary model: structural criteria, linguistic criteria, cultural criteria and illustration criteria. The examples that will be given throughout belong, of necessity, to the EED, the only dictionary that is so far based on the new model.

3. Structural criteria

As stated in the first section, bilingualized dictionaries seek to promote autonomy in the use of the monolingual dictionary. Nonetheless, their very structure is actually an obstacle for users to participate actively in their process of learning: as Laufer and Kimmel (1997: 367) and Thumb (2004: 91) have shown, users very often omit the definition and the example in the foreign language and look up the translation directly. To put it in other words: the fact that in classical bilingualized dictionaries translations appear alongside the monolingual definitions significantly diminishes the monolingual dictionary's potential of immersion in the foreign language. What is needed, then, is a new dictionary structure that combines the advantages of monolingual and bilingual dictionaries without the minimizing effect that the translation has on the monolingual part. This was one of the main reasons why the model on which the EED is based came into existence. As opposed to classical bilingualized dictionaries, in the new model the translation does not appear next to the monolingual definition. Rather, it is placed in the second part of the dictionary. That is why this type of dictionary is called *deferred*, while the former (i.e. the classical type) is called *immediate* (Pujol, Corrius and Masnou 2006: 199). We will illustrate the differences between these two types of dictionary by means of two diagrams. Figure 1 provides an example from a typical print immediate bilingualized dictionary, the *Password diccionario didáctico / Password English Dictionary for Speakers of Spanish* (PDD). Figure 2, on the other

hand, is based on two entries from the EED and illustrates how the structure of print deferred bilingualized dictionaries works.

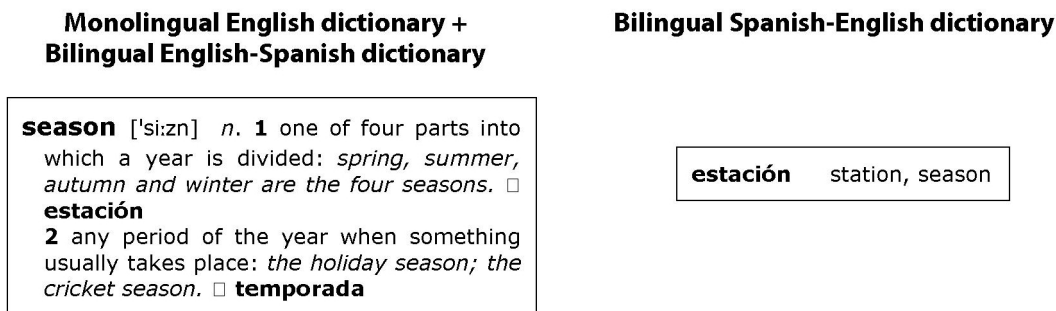


Figure 1: Structure of print immediate bilingualized dictionaries (example from the PDD)

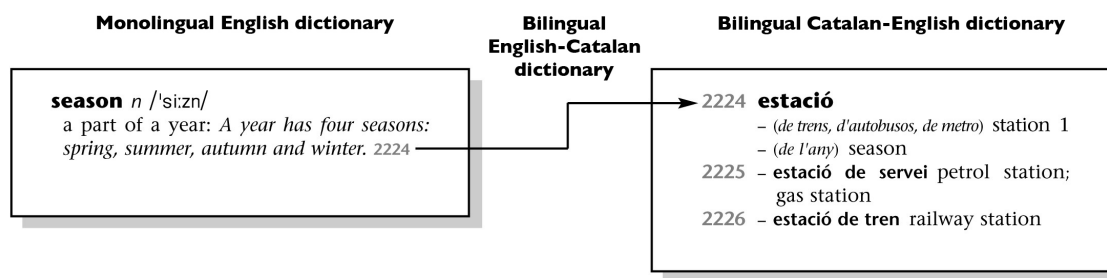


Figure 2: Structure of print deferred bilingualized dictionaries (example from the EED)

Structurally, the difference between immediate and deferred bilingualized dictionaries lies in the placement of the translation: whereas in immediate bilingualized dictionaries the translation appears in the first section of the dictionary, in deferred bilingualized dictionaries the translation appears in the second section. In this second type of dictionaries, then, the monolingual section is related to the bilingual one in such a way that the latter does not minimize the former: students read the monolingual part and stop there if they feel they understand the defined word. In immediate bilingualized dictionaries, by contrast, students cannot avoid seeing the translation, which often implies that they skip the monolingual part.

The fact that in deferred bilingualized dictionaries students are encouraged to read the text in the foreign language (English in the case of the EED) has some advantages as far as meaningful learning is concerned: when reading a definition, users relate the words to create a coherent meaning, and so the meaning of each individual word becomes reinforced. Apart from that, when users understand the meaning of the defined word, they learn meaningfully insofar as they manage to relate new information to a macronet of previous knowledge, that is, to words and grammatical structures already known. Let us suppose, however, that users fail to understand the definition. In this case, they may resort to a number which is placed at the very end of the entry. This number refers them to the translation in the second part of the dictionary. In this way, the user's autonomy when learning the foreign language is enhanced through the monolingual dictionary —users are encouraged to use the monolingual dictionary while they are discouraged to look up the translations *straight away*; nonetheless, they are autonomous enough to resort to the translation in case they need it. It must be noted that the structure of the new dictionary model can be adapted to any pair of languages (English and Spanish, English and Greek, German and Russian, etc.).

4. Linguistic criteria

The linguistic criteria employed in the conception of the model on which the EED is based apply both to the monolingual and the bilingual part. Immediate bilingualized dictionaries do not make any semantic distinction between the various translations of a word: users are given no clue as to which translation they should choose, so they typically end up selecting the first one to appear. The EED, on the other hand, provides learners with an explanation in brackets in their

own language, which will effectively lead them to make an informed choice. Rather than giving a set of arbitrary elements, deferred bilingualized dictionaries actively engage users in distinguishing between several meanings and integrating them into a knowledge macronet.

Let us turn now to the monolingual part. As this particular dictionary is aimed at Catalan students of primary and secondary education, the language used, both in the definitions and the examples, is meant to be easy for students to understand. Thus, it is expected that young students reinforce structures and vocabulary already known and are able to successfully associate them with new knowledge, with the result that the new information becomes solidly anchored in previous knowledge.

Apart from the aspects analyzed above, the EED takes into account the learner's linguistic background. More specifically, the words used in the definitions and examples are chosen, whenever possible, and without renouncing naturalness, for their similarity to the learner's own language. An example will serve to illustrate this point. In the EED one of the meanings of *fix* is defined as "to repair" —this definition is followed by the example "Can you fix my watch? It's not working". In the definition of *fix* the word "mend" could have been used instead of "repair", but "repair" was preferred because it is very similar to the Catalan word *reparar*. The *Password diccionario didáctico / Password English Dictionary for Speakers of Spanish*, a typical print immediate bilingualized dictionary, by contrast, defines *fix* as "to mend", when it would have been much more effective to define it as "to repair", a word quite similar to the Spanish word *reparar*. To sum up, the use of linguistically accessible definitions and examples smooths the way for the students' autonomous learning: they do not have to resort every now and then to the bilingual dictionary or to the teacher and, moreover, they are not discouraged—lack of understanding and the subsequent discouragement are arguably the two main problems faced by EFL learners using monolingual dictionaries.

5. Cultural criteria

Most EFL dictionaries, whether monolingual or bilingualized, are written by English (or American) companies but are aimed at a global market: the same edition is sold in such different countries as Spain, Argentina, Morocco, Finland, Germany, Nigeria and China. Bearing this in mind, it may be interesting to analyze the kind of treatment that culture-bound elements receive in this kind of dictionary. One example (*breakfast*) from a recent monolingual dictionary, the *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners* (MEDAL), will serve to illustrate our point. In the MEDAL, the word *breakfast* is defined as "the first meal you have in the morning", and it is followed by the following subentry: "a meal consisting of the things people often have for breakfast, for example eggs or bacon". This definition provides really useful cultural information, but what should be presented as a local specificity (the definition is clearly British-oriented) is in fact presented as a global characteristic: according to the MEDAL definition, people in general, not just British people, often have eggs or bacon for breakfast. The culture-bound element that has slipped into the definition of *breakfast* may have negative consequences: it may puzzle the global EFL learner and may even hinder comprehension—certainly most European citizens do not have eggs or bacon for breakfast; in Spain and many other European countries such a meal would rather be had for lunch or dinner than for breakfast.

By contrast with the type of dictionary represented by the MEDAL (a dictionary conceived from a British perspective with a global audience in mind), the model on which the EED is based frequently takes into account the cultural context of the target audience and may therefore define words by highlighting cultural specificities and avoiding cultural homogeneity. In the case of the EED, this implies defining and giving examples taking into consideration the Catalan end user, and more concretely both the differences with respect to the foreign culture and those specificities in the students' culture that may facilitate the comprehension of the defined word. To illustrate this, let us have a look at the example under *breakfast* in the EED: "Some English people have bacon and eggs for breakfast". The differences between a dictionary conceived from a local (British) perspective and aimed at a global (world-wide) audience like the MEDAL and a dictionary conceived from a local (Catalan) perspective and aimed at a local

(Catalan) audience like the EED are enormous: while the first presents a culturally-specific element as universal, the latter goes beyond these practices, and specifies that it is English, not Catalan people, who may have eggs or bacon for breakfast. In the cases examined, the new concept (*breakfast*) is related to familiar ideas and concepts in the cognitive structure of Catalan students. To sum up: by means of cultural referents which are non-arbitrary for the user, that is, by using concepts that are integrated into the learner's cognitive structures (or knowledge macronet), the dictionary model presented here substantially facilitates learning of the foreign (in this case English) language and culture ("Some English people have bacon and eggs for breakfast").

6. Illustration criteria

In illustrated dictionaries, the most arbitrary way of learning vocabulary consists in associating a word with a picture. EFL dictionaries usually classify vocabulary by thematic areas, for example by grouping colours or by pairing adjectives. Nonetheless, most dictionaries stop here and fail to provide an even wider learning context in the illustrations themselves. An example from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (CALD) will help to clarify the implications of what we have explained so far. The CALD defines the word *hen* as "an adult female chicken which is often kept for its eggs, or the female of any bird (see picture)". The picture in question is to be found not on the same page, but on a central thematic page called "Animals and birds". Among the animals portrayed there is a hen, which is labelled with the word *hen*. The illustrations provided in the CALD are presented as isolated, non-related vocabulary items, and they serve neither for contextual reception (i.e. to understand words in a context) nor for production (i.e. to produce sentences in the foreign language).

By contrast with the CALD, in the EED the word *hen* is illustrated in such a way that users not only understand the word, but are able, by just looking at the picture, to understand and produce new words associated with it. Indeed, this illustration invites users to learn not only an isolated word, but a whole series of related words: the inclusion of sentences and arrows inside the picture contextualizes the defined word and encourages the learning of new ones. To put it shortly, context helps students establish relationships between different learnt elements, each of which will become integrated into a knowledge macronet. In the CALD, on the other hand, the new element (*hen*) is perceived as arbitrary insofar as it does not become integrated into a knowledge macronet: neither in the picture nor in the definition is the learner taught (or reminded of) the expression "hens lay eggs".

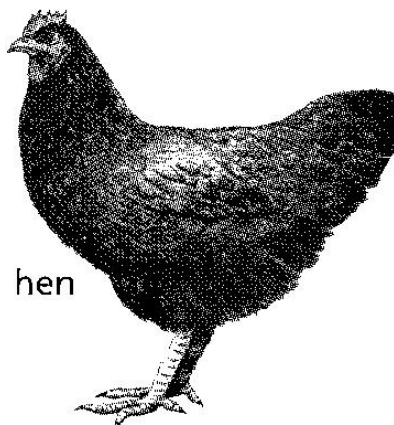


Figure 3: The word *hen* as illustrated in the CALD

hen *n* /hen/
a female chicken 2652

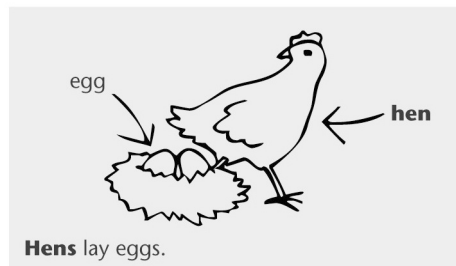


Figure 4: The word *hen* as illustrated in the EED

To finish this section, let us concentrate on another aspect of illustrations. According to Ausubel (2000: 6), “most learning, and all retention and organization, of subject matter [i.e. of knowledge] is hierarchical in nature”. This principle is essential in the new model proposed. Thus, the EED illustrates and labels, under *fishing rod*, not only the word in question, but also the fishing line and the hook. The same tenet applies to other pictures: in the case of *elephant*, the trunk and the tusks are also labelled; and in the case of *container*, a whole array of containers is illustrated and labelled—“can”, “box of matches”, “packet of biscuits”, “tube of toothpaste”, “tin of sardines”, etc.

7. Conclusions

The dictionary model presented in this paper includes a monolingual foreign language dictionary and two bilingual ones—in the case of the EED, a monolingual English dictionary, a bilingual English-Catalan dictionary and a bilingual Catalan-English dictionary. The synergy of three dictionaries increases the learning possibilities that each of these three types of dictionary offers in isolation. By separating the translations from the foreign language definitions and examples, the model described promotes the use of the L2 monolingual (English) dictionary, thus overcoming the limitations of immediate bilingualized dictionaries in which most students resort to the translation without even reading (and thus without benefiting from) the monolingual part.

The proposed dictionary model, which can be adapted to any pair of languages, is based on four pedagogical criteria (i.e. structural, linguistic, cultural and illustration criteria). The structure of the new dictionary model increases the user’s autonomy of the monolingual dictionary: when decoding messages in English, the students use the monolingual dictionary and resort to the bilingual one only when they feel they need it. The linguistic criteria employed increase the possibilities of meaningful learning, for the new vocabulary is learnt through already known basic vocabulary and structures, or through words similar to the student’s own language (Catalan in the case of the EED). As for the cultural criteria, instead of causing students to run into unknown, arbitrary cultural elements, the EED seeks to incorporate new concepts by means of already known cultural referents. And finally, the illustration criteria take into account the fact that dictionary makers may not wish to limit themselves to labelling the illustrated word, but may also want to consider the potential benefits of providing hierarchies and linguistic contexts within the pictures themselves.

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