

Teaching Dictionary-using Skills for Online Dictionaries: An Attempt at a Theoretical Framework for South Africa

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The aim of this paper is to illustrate a theoretical approach to teach dictionary-using skills in South Africa. As the focus is on online dictionaries, only dictionary-using skills will be discussed. Teaching dictionary-using skills in a linguistically heterogeneous society, which has not yet developed a fully functional dictionary culture for all languages, is a difficult task. Not only must the different languages—e.g. conjunctively written languages and disjunctively written languages—be taken into account, but also the different user groups ranging from pupils/university students to ordinary people who want to use a dictionary have to be considered. Although the dictionary users are not a homogeneous group, the aim of teaching dictionary-using skills is the same for all groups: achieving a confident and successful use of dictionaries in the short term and creating a fully developed dictionary culture that includes all the languages which are official in South Africa in the long term. The teaching of dictionary-using skills could be divided into four stages:

- *teaching about dictionaries,*
- *teaching basic skills to access dictionaries*
- *teaching look-up strategies,*
- *teaching strategies to decode the information found in the definition given by the dictionary.*

Dictionary-using skills should be taught as early as possible in schools, and this teaching should be continued throughout the whole education process, i.e. it should not be taught as a single module, but rather as language methodology. In tertiary education institutions, dictionary-using skills could be integrated into academic literacy modules or taught in separate short language modules. Teaching dictionary-using skills to everybody else will be more difficult, as those who have finished their formal education cannot be reached as easily as pupils or university students. This group will mainly be taught through the dictionaries themselves. Teaching dictionary-using skills to people through dictionaries implies that the dictionaries must be self-explanatory, which implies that the user interface and all instructions should be available in all the languages that the dictionary covers and not only in English. In addition to that, the dictionary should ideally be accompanied by a user manual in all languages the dictionary covers.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to illustrate a theoretical approach for teaching dictionary-using skills in South Africa. Such an approach is needed as the majority of South Africans still lives in a pre-dictionary culture environment (Gouws & Prinsloo 2005). Although general dictionaries exist for all official languages, only English and Afrikaans have an extensive range of specialised dictionaries as well and people living in a dictionary culture are mainly English or Afrikaans L1 speakers. A Dictionary culture will be defined as: *an environment in which the usage of dictionaries is an everyday activity and in which dictionaries are seen as valuable means to improve communication.*

Teaching dictionary-using skills in a linguistically heterogeneous society, which has not yet developed a fully functional dictionary culture for all languages, is a difficult task. The different languages have to be taken into account, as the African languages belong to two different language groups. There are the conjunctively written languages of the Nguni group—isiZulu,

isiXhosa, Siswati and isiNdebele and disjunctively written languages of the Sotho group—Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana as well as Tshivenda and Xitsonga. Additionally, the teaching must fit the different user groups, ranging from pupils, university students, teachers to ordinary people who want to use a dictionary. Their special needs and abilities must be considered.

Although the dictionary users are not a homogeneous group, the aim of teaching dictionary-using skills is the same for all groups: Achieving a confident and successful use of dictionaries as a short term result and creating a fully developed dictionary culture that includes all eleven official South African languages¹ as a long term result.

As the focus of this article is on online dictionaries, only dictionary-using skills that are needed for online dictionaries will be discussed in detail.

Which basic skills are needed?

Before the actual teaching of skills can start, the dictionary-using skills which are needed by each different user group must be identified. Skills which are needed by all groups are basic computer or cell phone² using skills, look-up strategies, skills to decode the information provided by the dictionary article, as well as a basic knowledge about dictionaries.

Having a basic computer or cell phone literacy is mandatory as those are the media to access online dictionaries. This includes knowledge of where to find such dictionaries and how to access them. Finding online dictionaries implies that the user either knows the web address of the dictionary or is able to find it with the help of search engines. Although this may sound extremely trivial to somebody who is used to work with a computer, it belongs to the basic computer skills that must be mastered before one can successfully use an online dictionary. Other basic knowledge includes being able to type and knowing how use a mouse and where to click in order to start the actual search, for example, knowing that one usually has to click on a button that says go or press return.

The teaching

As Atkins and Varantola (1998: 83) state, there are two options to reach better dictionary use: “the first is to radically improve the dictionary, the second is to radically improve the users”. Therefore, compiling extremely user-friendly dictionaries and teaching people how to use dictionaries efficiently are the two most important tasks for lexicographers in South Africa.

In order to improve the users, the important and sensitive question who is responsible for organizing the teaching and who can do the actual teaching must be solved before the teaching initiatives start.

Informing people about available dictionaries is the first step and is ideally done in cooperation with the media and influential L1 speakers of the language, who can help advertising the product. Other ways to make available dictionaries known is making them available to schools, tertiary education institutions, libraries, or community centres. Although pupils and university students can and should be taught as soon as there are materials and teachers available, everybody else who has already left the education system must be informed about online dictionaries before their teaching phase could start.

The teaching/learning phase

The teaching phase of dictionary-using skills could be divided into four main interdependent modules: 1. teaching about dictionaries, 2 teaching basic skills to access the dictionary 3. Teaching look-up strategies and, 4. Teaching strategies to decode the information found in the

¹ Afrikaans, English, isiNdebele, isi Xhosa, isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, Siswati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga

² Most cell phones nowadays enable internet access.

dictionary article. Those four modules are the same for all different user-groups but must be adapted according to the specific users and circumstances.

Module 1: Basic knowledge about (online) dictionaries

Although it might sound trivial to people who live in a functional dictionary culture and are used to work with dictionaries, the following questions must be answered:

1. What is an (online) dictionary? A dictionary that is available online, i.e., on the internet. A dictionary is a reference work in which the words of a language are listed together with their meanings and/or translations into one or more languages.
2. What is the aim of (online) dictionaries? Jackson (2002: 76) states “that dictionaries have two fundamental aims: coverage, and accessibility. Coverage includes the aim to be ‘comprehensive’, representing an up-to-date and wide-ranging selection of vocabulary, and the aim to be a ‘faithful record’ of the lexical resources of the language”.
3. Why and when should they be used? An online dictionary can be used to either decode (reading) or encode language information (speaking and/or writing). Other important factors of dictionary use are listed by Hartmann (1983: 11) include: find words, find meanings, extend the knowledge of the mother tongue, learn a foreign language and compose texts.

In addition, basic knowledge about dictionaries must include information about the different dictionary types, for example monolingual vs. bi/multilingual, or general vs. specialized dictionaries. Knowing the different types is a prerequisite in order to be able to choose the right dictionary for each situation and being able to choose the right dictionary improves the chance to find the word one is looking for. Teaching people what a dictionary is also includes telling them what it isn't and when it should not be used. That is, one should explain the difference between dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

Therefore, any course in “dictionary-using skills” should start with a combination of an explanation of the most important terms and a practical demonstration of an online dictionary. Another point that must be taught is information about the structure of online dictionaries. The students must be shown how online dictionaries look-like, how they are structured and how they can find their way around the online dictionary. This includes teaching about the user guide, i.e. making it clear that it is a very important part of the online dictionary as it explains how the dictionary works and contains explanations of all abbreviations and symbols which are used in the dictionary.

Module 2: Information to access a dictionary and their value for the people

This includes informing people about available dictionaries, their main advantages for the user, and last but not least, information about the whereabouts and costs of the dictionary. Teaching about the use and value of a dictionary is important in a society that has not yet developed a fully functional dictionary culture, as this is something that is not known to everyone in such a situation. The main use of dictionaries is to expand the vocabulary of its users by providing the user with information about the meaning, spelling, usage, pronunciation, grammar and/or etymology of words.

As Gouws (2007: 313) states, “[i]t is a well-attested fact that dictionaries play an important role in the standardisation of a language”. Having a dictionary for a language is also a status-symbol, it shows that the language is well developed and is worth to have a dictionary. This is an important psychological factor, as it improves the value of the language for its speakers and shows them that the language can be used in more formal domains of life, too. Therefore, having online dictionaries and being able to use them enables people to participate in more domains of life and empowers them in giving them the words to talk, write and read about a vast range of topics. If people are convinced that an online dictionary is valuable for them and can help them to improve their own life, then there is a chance that they might use it regularly, even if it seems difficult and tiresome at the beginning.

Module 3: Look-up strategies

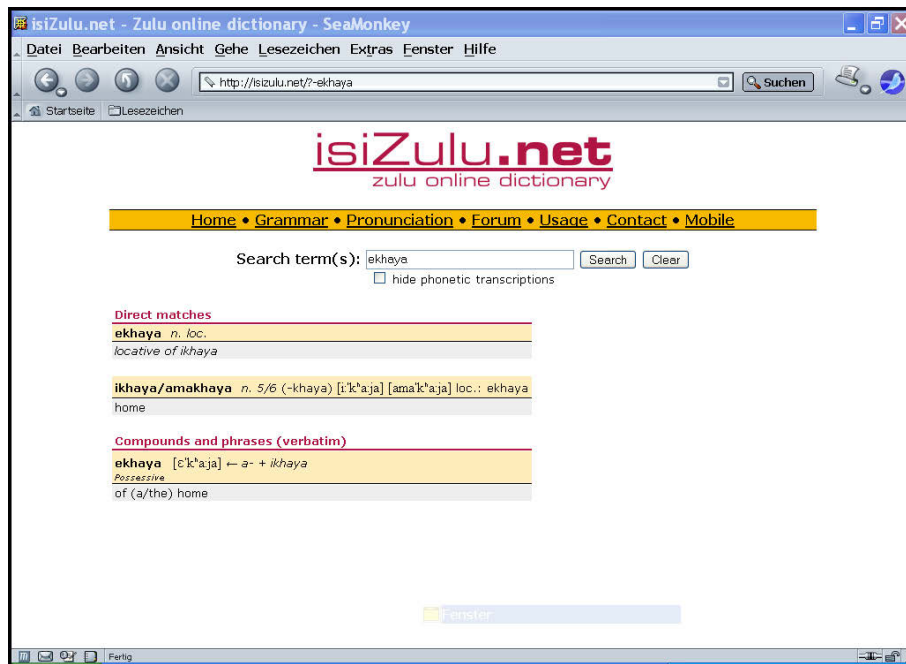
Teaching look-up strategies is extremely important as not all online dictionaries have a user-guide—in contrast to most print dictionaries, in which it is usually included in the front or back—matter of the dictionary. According to Landau (1996: 116), “the purpose of the [user] guide is to describe as clearly as possible all the information included in the dictionary, show the reader how to interpret the data given (i.e., how to read the dictionary’s “style”), and provide clues for locating as quickly as possible particular items of information”. A good example of a user guide is provided by the isiZulu.net English-Zulu dictionary which explains exactly how to use the dictionary and where to type in the search terms. In addition, the structure and all elements of the results are explained, together with all abbreviations used in the dictionary.


If this information is missing, the users are expected to know what to do in order to get the necessary information. This implies that they must learn how to find a word in the dictionary, i.e. they must know where and how they have to type the search word. Gouws and Prinsloo (2005: 28) argue that “[t]he way in which lemmata are presented as macro structural items must not cause users to become alienated from the form in which they are confronted with the relevant lexical items in their everyday communication”. This is especially important in the case of the conjunctively written Nguni languages in which the stem lemmatisation might cause some severe problems to everybody who is not familiar with this concept as the stem look quite different to the word form in the text. Therefore, being familiar with the concept of lemmatization used by the specific dictionary is a prerequisite for a successful search. If the online dictionary has a user-guide, potential users must know how to access it and how to process the information given by it. Nevertheless, as online dictionaries have virtually no space restrictions, dictionary compilers can easily avoid this problem by including all word forms as search words that automatically lead the user to the “main” lemma. This can be seen in the following example of the isiZulu word *ekhaya* (meaning at home). If you type in this word, the dictionary automatically directs the user to the main entry.



Module 4: Decode Information

Being able to decode the information implies that the user has a basic knowledge about dictionaries, i.e. he must know what the different components of a dictionary article mean. Teaching how to decode the information provided by a dictionary article is ideally done in two interdependent steps: First through explaining the meaning of the different components of the dictionary article and second, through using the dictionary as a tool in the language classroom.



In this example, the English word *home* was used as a search word. The most striking feature here is that the user has the choice between a complete interface in either English or Sesotho sa Leboa. Although there are two possibilities to enter a search word in this example, one for an English and the other one for a Sesotho sa Leboa word, the user is not likely to confuse them as they are clearly marked. The dictionary lists six different senses in Sesotho sa Leboa. The languages are visually differentiable because of their different colours and fonts, the Sesotho sa Leboa lemmata are printed in bold and blue, whereas the English lemmata are printed in green. Another important aspect here is that some words have a pronunciation example added which is marked by the symbol .



This example shows that the user must not only be able to decode the information presented as translation but also the abbreviations which follow the search word. In this case this would be n for noun and 5/6, representing the class the noun belongs to. In order to do this, the user is expected to have a certain amount of linguistic background knowledge, i.e. they must know what nouns are and that they belong to different classes.

Decoding the information should not be taught as a single module that is repeated several times and forgotten afterwards but it should be integrated in text production and reception exercises.

When, where and how could it be taught?

Ideally, dictionary-using skills should be taught as early as possible in schools and this teaching should be continued throughout the whole education, i.e. it should not be taught as a single module but as a methodology for language learning that becomes an everyday activity in the (language) classroom. At tertiary education institutions, dictionary-using skills could be integrated in academic literacy modules or taught as separate short language modules.

Teaching dictionary-using skills to everybody else will be more difficult, as those people have finished their formal education and cannot be reached as easily as pupils and university students. Although this group could be taught in the future in libraries, community centres and evening classes by members of the speech community who already use online dictionaries frequently, confidently and successfully, they will mainly be taught through the dictionaries themselves in the first few years until a dictionary-culture starts to develop. Teaching dictionary-using skills to people through dictionaries implies that the dictionaries must be self-explanatory, i.e. it must be obvious what the user has to do in order to find a specific word. This implies that the user interface and all instructions should be available in all languages the dictionary covers and not only in English. In addition, the dictionary should ideally be accompanied by a short and easy to understand user manual in all languages the dictionary covers.

Conclusion

As online dictionaries are the future because they are user-friendly, have virtually no space restrictions, are easy to access, cheap, and allow easy user-feedback, the intended users and their dictionary-using skills must be taken into account when compiling online dictionaries for the official languages. This implies that there must be a well-organized co-operation between teachers, lecturers, administrative organizations like the department of Arts and Culture, the department of Education, the media and lexicographers as compiling online dictionaries is only the first step. Making them available to the public and teaching the people how to use them successfully are the next steps which can only be realised successfully if all groups that are involved in the lexicographic scene work closely together. This might be quite difficult to realise, especially if there are many different groups and languages involved as it is the case in South Africa.

Although this approach is designed mainly for the South African case, the framework could be applied to all societies in a pre-dictionary-culture environment.

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