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## Learner Dictionaries

Getting your students to use their dictionaries effectively

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OXFORD

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## 1. Introduction

There is no doubt that the single most important resource students have for learning English is their dictionary. There are very few students or teachers who cannot benefit from learning how to use dictionaries effectively. This guide will review many of the main issues concerned with getting students to use their dictionaries effectively, and to get students to understand that their dictionaries are not just lists of words with their meanings. We will also look at ways to help teachers train their students how to use a dictionary.

## 2. Why should we teach dictionary skills?

There are several reasons why we should teach dictionary skills.

- Such skills give students greater control over their own learning, and shift the responsibility of learning to the student.
- We are not born knowing how to use dictionaries well, so students need to gain this knowledge and these skills, in order to use their dictionary effectively.
- It helps students to disentangle information in the dictionary by making things explicit to them.
- Dictionaries naturally generate a great deal of thinking about meaning and language.
- If they can use dictionaries well, there will be minimal classroom disruption because teachers can rely on students to get the correct meaning.
- Dictionaries can provide useful support not simply when teachers are in doubt about something but when they want students to confirm their own suppositions about something in English.
- Dictionaries can serve as a focus for communication and classroom interaction.
- Dictionary training can help students explore personal preferences and learning styles and may also lead students to new modes of study.

Dictionaries are not only a tool for private or individual learning problems, but they can also become a springboard to all sorts of other communicative and interactive activities. By exploiting dictionaries as a

Dictionaries are more than just lists of words and their meanings.

source of interaction, we can help students develop their confidence as dictionary users and as language learners. An important benefit of this is that students will be exposed to a great deal of language that will help them experience and explore it.

Many teachers understand the need to teach dictionary skills, but nevertheless do not teach their students how to use a dictionary. These are some of the reasons for this.

- Many teachers assume that students already know how to use an English-English dictionary effectively, because they believe the students can already use a dictionary well in Japanese.
- Some teachers are afraid that students will resist an English-English dictionary, and stay dependent on a bilingual dictionary. Such teachers feel that their efforts will be wasted.
- Convincing a student to learn to use an English-English dictionary takes a lot of time and commitment on the part of the teacher and the student.
- Dictionary work is not part of the syllabus.
- Dictionary work is not considered interesting.
- Teachers do not have a clear understanding of what is in the dictionary or how to introduce an English-English dictionary.
- Students do not all have the same English-English dictionary so it makes training problematic.

Because of these (and other) beliefs, many teachers assume that the dictionary skills the students have in Japanese will be enough, and therefore the teacher does not have to spend time teaching the students how to use an English-English dictionary.

### 3. What kinds of dictionaries are there ?

There are several types of dictionary. The most commonly used dictionaries in Japan are the bilingual dictionaries and Learner Dictionaries, but there are other dictionaries too.

**Bilingual dictionaries** These dictionaries are bilingual because they use both English and Japanese. These are the most commonly used dictionaries in Japan.

## **Monolingual (English-English) dictionaries**

These are dictionaries for native speakers. *Student dictionaries* are monolingual native-speaker dictionaries intended for native speaker students. They are quite different from Learner Dictionaries. However, an exception to this is *Oxford Student's Dictionary*, which is designed for learners of English.

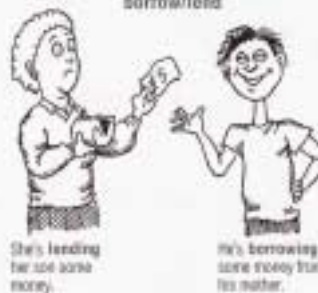
## **Learner Dictionaries**

Learner Dictionaries are English-English dictionaries that have been written for language learners. There are dictionaries at different difficulty levels, from Elementary dictionaries with simple definitions and a small word list, such as *Oxford Wordpower dictionary*, to near native-speaker level dictionaries such as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (OALD). Learner Dictionaries differ from native-speaker dictionaries because they are written by language specialists, for language students who are in the process of learning the language. However, there are several types of Learner Dictionary, as we shall see.

Good Learner Dictionaries have many features beyond the spelling, pronunciation and meaning. They will also have information such as style notes regarding cultural connotations, and whether the word is formal or dated. These dictionaries also often try to disambiguate similar words such as borrow and lend. Most Learner Dictionaries also have vocabulary-building advice and study notes on how to use the dictionary well. All this is in addition to the grammar and dialectal notes one usually finds in dictionaries.

Most Learner Dictionaries are written with a special defining vocabulary, which are most common and useful words in English. For example, *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary* has a defining vocabulary of 2500 very useful words. The definitions in the dictionary are restricted to the use of these words in order to maximize the chances that a student will understand the definition. All Oxford Learner Dictionaries have been made using a large corpus of real English samples taken from real-world examples. This means that the dictionary makers have looked at millions of words of English to see how the language is actually used. For example, this corpus data allows the meanings to emerge from real language evidence, rather than simply being decided by the dictionary writer's intuition.

**borrow/lend**



She's lending  
her use some  
money.

He's borrowing  
some money from  
his mother.

\* **borrow** /'bɒrəʊ/ **verb** [LT] borrow (sth) (from/off sb/sth) **1** to take or receive sth from sb/sth that you intend to give back, usually after a short time: *I had to borrow from the bank to pay for my car.* • *We'll have to borrow a lot of money to buy a car.* • *Could I borrow your pen for a minute?* • *He's always borrowing off his mother.* • *I borrowed a book from the library.*

➤ Be careful not to confuse **borrow** with its opposite **lend**.

**2** to take sth and use it as your own; to copy sth: *That idea is borrowed from another book.*

**borrower** /'bɒrəʊə/ **noun** [C] a person who borrows sth

\* **court** /kɔ:t/ **noun** **1** [C,U] a place where legal trials take place and crimes, etc are judged: *A man has been charged and will appear in court tomorrow.* • *Bill's company are refusing to pay him so he's decided to take them to court.* **2** **the court** [sing] the people in a court, especially those taking part in the trial: *Please tell the court exactly what you saw.* **3** [C,U] an area where certain ball games are played: a tennis/squash/badminton court

➤ Compare **pitch**.

**court** /kɔ:t/ **verb** [T] **1** to try to gain sb's support by paying special attention to him/her: *Politicians from all parties will be courting voters this week.* **2** to do sth that might have a very bad effect: *Britain is courting ecological disaster if it continues to dump waste in the North Sea.*

**courteous** /kɔ:tias/ **adjective** polite and pleasant, showing respect for other people ➤ opposite **discourteous** – **courteously** **adverb**

**courtesy** /kɔ:tiəsi/ **noun** (pl **courtesies**) **1** [U] polite and pleasant behaviour that shows respect for other people: *She didn't even have the courtesy to say that she was sorry.* **2** [C] (formal) a polite thing that you say or do when you meet people in formal situations: *The two presidents exchanged courtesies before their meeting.*

☐ [by] **courtesy** of sb (formal) with the permission or because of the kindness of sb: *These pictures are being shown by courtesy of BBC TV.*

**Picture Dictionaries** Another kind of Learner Dictionary is the picture dictionary. These dictionaries illustrate the meanings of words. Many teachers and students find these very useful.



45. paint pan ペンキ入れ	49. masking tape マスキングテープ
46. paint roller ペンキローラー	50. sandpaper 紙ヤスリ
47. paintbrush ペンキはけ	51. chisel のみ
48. scraper 削り器	52. plane かんな

Multimedia dictionaries are used on a computer and come on a computer CD. *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary CD-Rom* is an example of a multimedia dictionary.

## Multimedia dictionaries



Most teachers and students are not aware of this type of dictionary because they work differently from other dictionaries. Production dictionaries put words of the same topic, or words with nearly the same meaning, in the same place so that they can be compared. An advantage of this type of dictionary is that the student can find new words easily. In a normal mono-lingual dictionary, students look up the meanings of words they already know. Look at the example from *Oxford Learner's Wordfinder Dictionary*. In this example we can see that several words with a similar meaning to borrow are listed together.

## Production dictionaries

**borrow/lend**

see also **give**

- to take or receive sth from sb/sth that you intend to give back: **borrow** (sth) (from/off sb/sth) - *I've borrowed £10 from Arthur, but I've got to give it back by Friday.* - *If we need more money, we'll have to borrow from the bank.*
- a person who borrows sth: **borrower**
- to allow sb to use sth which they must give back later: **lend**\* sth (to sb), (formal) **loan** sth (to sb) - *Arthur lent me £10 until Friday.* - *The Queen loaned some paintings to the art exhibition.*
- if you borrow sth from sb, it is (formal) **on loan** - *Several of the most valuable items are on loan from the British Museum.*
- a person or organization that lends you sth: (formal) **lender** - *Banks and building societies are the main lenders of money in Britain.*
- when you give back sth which you have borrowed, you **return** it (to sb/sth), **take**\*/**give**\* it **back** (to sb/sth)

■ **borrowing money**

- money, etc that sb/sth lends you: **loan** - *The bank have given me a £5000 loan.*
- money that you borrow in order to buy a house: **mortgage** - *I've taken out an £80000 mortgage over 25 years.*
- the money that you pay to a bank, etc for borrowing an amount of money: **interest** (noun U)
- the percentage of interest that you pay for borrowing an amount of money: **interest rate** - *The government has just brought interest rates down to 8%.*

#### 4. Which is better, a bilingual dictionary, or a Learner Dictionary ?

The short answer is neither, and both. Bilingual and Learner Dictionaries should not be seen as competitors, but as complementary to each other. Both types of dictionary have their place in the larger picture of language learning.

The use of bilingual dictionaries and Learner Dictionaries is not an either / or decision. They are complementary, not competitors.

Bilingual dictionaries:

- provide a faster way of getting the meaning for many students
- can be very helpful for students who do not have enough language ability to understand definitions in English
- give a sense of security because the meaning is given in Japanese

Many students automatically and unconsciously reach for the bilingual dictionary whenever they meet an unknown word. This is called the 'Bilingual Dictionary Reflex.' Teachers and students have to be wary of this because it can have long-term negative effects. A bilingual dictionary is often good enough to help a student with immediate needs (i.e., the word they are looking up now), but the long-term goal is to be able to work in English, and this can be better achieved with a Learner Dictionary—but only when the student is ready for one.

Many teachers and students mistakenly believe that bilingual dictionaries are bad for language learning. These criticisms include:

- Bilingual dictionaries reinforce the notion that there are 'parallel worlds' in the two languages, when in reality many concepts in Japanese do not exist in English and cannot be translated, and vice versa.
- Bilingual dictionaries emphasize the notion that translation is the best way to learn words.
- Bilingual dictionaries often have more than one translation in each headword and the student does not know which is the correct one to use at that moment. For example, in English we can say 'weak tea' and 'weak man' but not 'weak cigarettes' (we prefer 'mild cigarettes').



These criticisms are largely unfair if one takes a balanced view to the use of the mother tongue in language learning. It is not the dictionaries themselves which may be criticized, but the way the dictionaries are used, and abused. Furthermore, these criticisms ignore the advantages of bilingual dictionaries and their place in the larger picture of language learning. For example, it would be unreasonable to expect a beginning student to understand definitions in English. In addition, translating as a way of understanding is no better or worse than any other way, and there are times when a quick translation is all that is needed, leaving a deeper analysis to another time.

A bilingual dictionary is often good enough for understanding the passage, but the real goal is to work in English, and this can be better achieved with a Learner Dictionary.

Thus the use of bilingual dictionaries and Learner Dictionaries is not an either/or decision. They are complementary, not competitors and both have roles to play in the scheme of things. However, in order to learn the language well, eventually the student has to work within the language, not from outside it. Thus students have to eventually get used to Learner Dictionaries and not depend on bilingual dictionaries. Our job as teachers is not to prevent the use of bilingual dictionaries, but to promote wise dictionary use. This starts from the effective use of a bilingual dictionary, which leads to good practice with Learner Dictionaries. Thus it is not advisable to do away with the bilingual dictionary completely, and certainly not overnight. It can take a year or more to get the student out of the bilingual dictionary reflex and into judicious use of the Learner Dictionary. We shall look at some ways to do this later.

## 5. Moving on to Learner Dictionaries

There are several reasons why students should upgrade from a bilingual dictionary to a Learner Dictionary when they are ready.

- The students will be practising English as they use their dictionaries.
- Language researchers say that because more mental effort is needed to use Learner Dictionaries, there is a better chance that information will be retained and have a lasting effect.
- All words exist within relationships of other words and by using a

Our job as teachers is not to prevent the use of bilingual dictionaries, but to turn the use of a bilingual dictionary into good practice with Learner Dictionaries.

Learner Dictionary, the students will be meeting these word relationships and building their passive vocabulary.

- Many words cannot be translated easily.

## 6. Why do some Japanese students resist Learner Dictionaries ?

It is well known that many Japanese students prefer bilingual dictionaries to Learner Dictionaries. There are several reasons why this may be so.

- The students can be persuaded to buy a textbook, but are reluctant to buy a dictionary they cannot understand, or are not familiar with.
- Students prefer the security of what they know – their ‘old friend’ the bilingual dictionary.
- They do not know what types of Learner Dictionaries are available, nor how to select one.
- Most students of English do not have enough language ability (about 2000 words) to deal with the defining vocabulary in Learner Dictionaries.
- Many students feel that Learner Dictionaries are too difficult, which is not surprising if most students are not able to understand one effectively without instruction.
- Learning to use the Learner Dictionary is thought to be too much hard work. Many students cannot be bothered.
- Some students have bought a Learner Dictionary and have tried to use it without much success, and have thus been put off all Learner Dictionaries. The lack of success may have been due to trying to use a Learner Dictionary before they were ready, or the lack of adequate training, or even that they bought a Learner Dictionary at the wrong level.

Thus it is the teacher’s task to allay these fears with adequate and timely dictionary training.

## 7. Which Learner Dictionary is best for my students ?

If at all possible, when selecting a dictionary, the students should be asked about their preferences. Here are some factors that should be considered when selecting a class dictionary.

- The number of headwords
- Quality of the entries (easy to understand definitions, good examples, etc.)
- Student proficiency level
- Features in the dictionary (such as frequency information, appendices, etc.)
- Ease of understanding the pronunciation systems
- Ease of understanding the symbols in the dictionary
- Clarity of the layout
- Availability of dictionary training activities
- Price and availability
- Size and weight (bigger is not always better!)

## 8. How do Japanese students use their dictionaries ?

Research shows that Japanese students use their dictionaries as the main way to increase their vocabulary, and also shows that they only use a small number of the features in their dictionaries. The main activities are:

- to check the spelling of a word
- to look for a word's meaning or a translation.

Far less frequently do students look

- to see if a word exists (a derived form, for example)
- for synonyms or collocations
- for the pronunciation or word stress
- at the grammar of the word
- at the use of the word (its register)
- for inflections or derived forms

The activity least commonly reported is the use of the dictionary to randomly flick through the dictionary to look for new words.

Research shows that less than 15% of Japanese students report have received instruction on how to use any dictionary.

## 9. Can Japanese students use their dictionaries well ?

The vast majority of college students in Japan report that they have never been taught how to use any kind of dictionary – even a Japanese–Japanese or a bi–lingual dictionary. Further, they report that when dictionary training is done, it is usually finished within one class. Moreover, the training is very limited and is usually only done to help students find the correct meanings. It is hardly surprising then that students often select words and meanings inappropriately and cannot use their dictionaries effectively.

Informal surveys report that most dictionary training in Japan is over within one class

Research also suggests that if the task is very specific, such as looking for spelling, pronunciation, or to see if a word exists, the success rate is quite high. However, if the task is more demanding, such as working out the word’s grammar from the examples, or finding appropriate word relationships, then the rate of success is usually lower. Most dictionary activity in Japan is focused on immediate need; for example, to find a word’s meaning in a passage. But once the meaning is found, nothing else is done and the word is forgotten. Thus, many students find themselves looking up the same word time and time again. These findings suggest that Japanese students need to be trained how to use their dictionaries and how to learn vocabulary more effectively. We shall look at some ways to do this later.

## 10. What challenges face Japanese students when using their dictionaries?

There are many challenges students face when learning to use a dictionary. All of these problems, and more, can be resolved by effective training. Here are a few.

### **Finding the right entry**

The first challenge is finding the word in the dictionary. For many words this is quite straightforward, but for others it is a frustratingly complex task. Often the form of the word that the student wants to look up may not appear in the dictionary where they expect it. For example, *walked*, or *incomprehensible* may be found under the head-

words *walk* and *comprehend*. Many students would instantly recognize that *walked* would appear under the entry *walk*, but may not know that *incomprehensible* might appear under *comprehend*. This is particularly difficult when the meaning is figurative or idiomatic. Under which headword would they look up *make a mistake*, *kick the bucket*, *learn the ropes*, or even *see you later*?

Many words have several meanings, such as *bank* or *duty*. Research strongly suggests that once the word form has been found many students usually only select the first of several meanings as the correct answer, and ignore the rest. However, if the meaning senses are very different, as with the several meanings of *bank*, then the students will find the correct entry quite easily, but if the meaning senses are quite similar, or are nuances of the same broad meaning, then finding the right nuance can be very difficult.

Poorly written example sentences in dictionaries may be too difficult to understand for many students, especially if they are looking for information about the word beyond its meaning.

Dictionaries contain a lot of information such as grammatical and phonological information (each with special codes and symbols), which can be off-putting because they can seem like yet another foreign language to learn. Moreover, there may not be enough information in the entry to help the students find what they want, as there is not enough space to put all the information about a word in a dictionary. This can lead to frustrations on the part of the student. The grammatical information in the dictionary may help a student to use the word, for example, by saying that the word requires a direct object. But the student does not always know which direct object goes with it. Fortunately, this information can often be found in *Oxford Learner's Wordfinder Dictionary*.

## **Finding the right meaning**

## **Learning from the examples**

## **Making sense of the entry**

## 11. When should students turn to a dictionary, and when not?

The very long-term goal of vocabulary and dictionary instruction should be to make the student independent of teachers and dictionaries, and help students get past the 'Dictionary Reflex' as a means of solving their vocabulary problems. This means students have to learn how to deal with unknown words and turn to the dictionary only when absolutely necessary.

The time spent on dictionary training will repay itself several times over in the long-term.

The decision whether to use a dictionary or not depends upon the task at hand. When the student is engaged in fluency work, such as in a conversation or reading fluently, then the use of the dictionary will severely disrupt the communication flow. However, if communication completely breaks down because of the unknown word, the student should first try to guess the word from the context and only resort to the dictionary if absolutely necessary. On the other hand, if the task involves language study, then the use of a dictionary as a primary tool is more acceptable.

However, in both situations the student should always try to guess unknown words before looking in a dictionary. There are several reasons for this:

- It trains the student to become independent of a dictionary.
- It forces the student to think more deeply about the word.
- It makes the student a better guesser.
- It increases mental effort so the chances of remembering the word will be higher.

In a similar way, if a teacher only gives a translation of a word, it takes away a chance for the students to become independent learners, because it creates dependence on the teacher's knowledge. Thus it is sometimes kinder not to teach, but to let the students learn for themselves.

## **Guess before looking up - learning to guess mean- ings successfully**

Research shows that students will not be able to guess unknown words successfully unless most of the other words in the text are known. Successful guessing occurs best when more than 95–98% of the other words are known (i.e., one unknown word for every 20–50 words of text). If the percentage is lower than this, successful guessing is unlikely because the text is too difficult. Thus, asking students to guess the meanings of words when the surrounding text has many unknown words is likely to result in failure. Teachers therefore should do “guessing from context” activities with relatively easy texts.

There are several steps involved in learning to guess unknown words successfully from fluent reading.

- Step 1. The first thing to do when a student meets an unknown word is to ignore it and keep reading. If it is important, it will come again and the student can guess again the next time. In the meantime, the student should be focused on the meaning of the rest of the text. The students should learn to suspend not knowing some words they read.
- Step 2. If comprehension breaks down because of the unknown word, the student should then find out what part of speech the word is. For example, the students should decide if it is a verb, or a noun.
- Step 3. The student should then look at the immediate context (the sentence) to determine the meaning of the word (e.g., a verb involving an action of some kind). It is very important that the students understand that they do not need to guess a meaning perfectly. Being close enough to regain comprehension of the sentence is enough.
- Step 4. The next stage involves checking the guess. The student should then substitute this meaning into the sentence replacing the unknown word and read the sentence again to see if the sentence makes sense. At this stage the student could also use word-part knowledge to check the guess. For example, if the student knows that *mis-* has a negative connotation, then they will understand that the unknown word, *mistranslate*,

involves a mistake in translation. However, if the student tries to guess the meaning using word-part knowledge too soon, there is a danger that the wrong meaning may be inferred. For example, if the student knows that *pre-* means before (as in *pre-war*), then they may incorrectly guess that *president* means “before sident.” Thus the meaning element must come first.

- Step 5. If the sentence makes sense, the student should continue reading. However, if comprehension breaks down again because the guess might not have been successful, then the student should go back to step 2 and use a wider context (say several lines before and after the unknown word).
- Step 6. Finally the student might want to confirm the guess in a dictionary.

## 12. Encouraging dictionary use in class

There are several things teachers can do to encourage dictionary work.

Students need to know most of the dictionary's defining vocabulary before they will be comfortable using a Learner Dictionary.

- Always look for opportunities to build up the students' skills in using their dictionary.
- Try to make the classroom activities engaging so that those students who do not like dictionaries will reach for them more readily. Enjoyable activities affect student motivation.
- Try to integrate dictionary work throughout the class rather than have it as a separate session. This will encourage them to see the dictionary as an integral part of language learning.
- When you ask the students to use a dictionary, use it yourself. This will tell you how long an activity takes and will enable you to understand what kind of mistakes the students make.
- Try not to hurry students with their dictionaries. You should allow plenty of time for false starts, mistakes in selecting words or meanings, and so on.
- It is important to discuss failures and successes with the students.
- Try also to get the students to spend some time (say, 5 minutes at the end of a class) just looking through the dictionary, exploring it. Picture dictionaries are particularly useful for this.



- If you have some spare time you can put several words on the board, which will come up later in the lesson. They can look these words up before class.
- Whenever possible, allow the students to use dictionaries in (especially non-critical) tests. Life without recourse to a dictionary is unnatural and the students should be allowed to use it when they want. Alternatively, after a test, get the students to use their dictionary to improve their work in the test before handing it in. This will help them see that a dictionary can help them.
- Set vocabulary goals for the students. If the teacher expects the students to find 3-5 new words per day of their own choice in the dictionary, then it is likely they will do it. If it is voluntary, then it is likely they won't. The students can discuss their chosen words with other students.

Once the students are using their dictionaries consistently, the teacher has to monitor their use to see if they are using it effectively and correctly. However, teachers should be aware of a good balance between dictionary dependence and dictionary independence.

### 13. Dictionary Training

This section will look at how and when to begin dictionary training, and will present many example activities for doing so. Many more of these kinds of activities can also be found in the Oxford Resource Books for Teachers series book called 'Dictionaries' written by Jon Wright.

Dictionary training cannot be done in one lesson. It will take parts of many lessons over several months, going slowly so as not to dent any growing confidence with the Learner Dictionary. Some teachers say they do not have the time for this, but learning how to use a Learner Dictionary effectively takes time. Time spent on training will repay itself several times over in the long-term.

Learning how to use a Learner Dictionary effectively takes time, but in the long term it is time well spent.

**When should training begin?** Ideally, pre-dictionary training should begin before the students get a bilingual dictionary. If the students have never had dictionary instruction, then it should start as soon as possible.

**What do we want to achieve in the training?** There are several important things we should aim to achieve in the training. We need to:

- train the students to understand what is in the dictionary, where to find it and how it can help them
- ensure they know how to use the dictionary so that they can use it successfully every time
- ensure the students are confident dictionary users
- ensure the students understand when they should, and should not, look in the dictionary

Training in the use of any dictionary will be easier if all the students have the same dictionary. This is not always possible, but if the students have not bought a Learner Dictionary, the teacher should suggest the whole class get the same dictionary so that training will be smoother. Alternatively, the school may buy class sets, one for every two or three students, which can be shared between classes.

**What steps are involved in dictionary training?** There are several steps on the way to becoming a successful dictionary user. We should start the training before the students start to use their dictionary. This is called pre-dictionary training. Dictionary training itself should start with what the students know – possibly their bi-lingual dictionary. Later we should introduce Learner Dictionaries and gradually move them on to Learner Dictionaries. This can be summarized in the following table.

### Recommended dictionary use by proficiency level

Proficiency level	Which Dictionary?	Aim
<b>Beginner</b>	Bilingual dictionary mainly	Make the students feel comfortable with the bilingual dictionary, but not dependent on it.
<b>Lower Elementary to Lower Intermediate</b>	Use the bilingual dictionary first, and check by looking in the Learner Dictionary	Introduce a Learner Dictionary slowly so as not to overload the student
<b>Lower Intermediate to Intermediate</b>	Use the Learner Dictionary first, and check by looking in the Bilingual dictionary, if necessary	Make the students comfortable with a Learner Dictionary
<b>High Intermediate</b>	Learner Dictionary mostly	Ensure that the use of a Learner Dictionary is successful most of the time.

Part of dictionary training also includes vocabulary training. We shall first look at how to deal with words met in the dictionary, and use these ideas to help the students with their use of the dictionary. Later we shall look at some dictionary training exercises.

An essential part of dictionary training for students is to learn to deal effectively with the vocabulary they will look up. If vocabulary learning is effective, then they will not forget words, and not find themselves having to look up the same words time and time again. One major problem students face when learning words is human memory. Human memory dictates that we will forget things unless we bring them back to memory soon. If students meet a word for the first time and do not come back to it soon, it is almost certain that the word will be forgotten. Thus students need to meet their words very frequently in order to learn them. Therefore, we should ensure that strategies for remembering words are part of our overall aims for dictionary training. One common way to do this is through the use of a **word bank** using small **word cards**.

### Some example activities for dictionary training

### Remembering the vocabulary from the training - 'word banks'

Finding time to make the word cards is easy; making a commitment to remembering them is the difficult part

This involves asking each student to copy individual words they need to learn onto small word cards that are available from any stationery shop. These may be words the teacher assigns to be learned, new words the students look up, or both. For each word, the spelling and pronunciation (with the stress) are put on one side and the meaning is put on the other (either in Japanese, or as a picture, or in any other way the student wants to remember the word). It may also be helpful to add the part of speech as well. Each separate meaning sense for a word would go on a different card. The student puts these word cards in a small envelope that is labelled "My Word Bank." This is where the students 'save' all their words. They should bring this envelope to every class. At the beginning or end of each class (or on the train on the way to and from school) the students should spend 5 minutes trying to remember the words. They empty out their 'word bank' and look at one side of the card, trying to recall the other side (alternatively a friend can 'test' them). In this way words do not get forgotten and the effort of looking in the dictionary is not wasted. However, if time is not put aside in each class for working with the old word cards, then the effort will be wasted, as the words will be forgotten. Finding time to make the cards is easy; making a commitment to remembering them is the difficult part.

Any new word can be put in the 'word bank,' whether it came from the dictionary or not. So it is always a good idea for the student to bring some blank word cards to each class. Many teachers ask students to make a word card for each new word that the teacher puts on the board. Students often have excellent ideas how to organize their own 'word banks.' Some students put a star on important word cards, or use different colour cards (or pens) for each part of speech, for example.

### **Pre-dictionary training**

All Oxford University Press dictionaries have additional dictionary exercises for the students

The first stage of dictionary training happens before the students look at their dictionary. At this stage the students should know the alphabet and its order. If the students are already familiar with the alphabet, then this section can be skipped.

Put random lists of about 20 words on the blackboard that that the students have learned. The students race each other to re-write them onto word cards (correctly spelled) and then put them in alphabetical order. When they are ready for a dictionary they can fill in the meaning on the back of the cards and use them for vocabulary study.

### **Learning the alphabet order**

Same as above, but you should list up words that have letters the students often confuse when they try to recognize them. For example *q*, *p*, *b* and *d* look similar. So you might use words such as *pan*, *ban*, *Dan*, and *lamb*, *lamp*, *damp*, *drab*, and so on. There are several ways to practice this. If each word is written on a list two times, the students should try to match the pairs. Or alternatively, the words can be put in a list in pairs, some of which are the same word (*ban ban*) and some pairs have different ones (*dan ban*). They go down the lists and have to circle the pairs that have different words.

### **Working with difficult letters**

For training to be effective, all students should have the same dictionary. If they do not, you may be able to borrow some dictionaries from somewhere (many schools have a class set), or they could share. Before embarking on any training, you should explain why dictionary training is important to them and how it can help them to become independent learners in the long term.

### **Beginning training with a dictionary**

The teacher should point out each section of the dictionary, such as the introduction (which the students should read), the entries, the appendices, and so on. Ask the students to look in their dictionaries to find them and write down the page numbers.

### **Orientation to the dictionary**

Have all the students look at a chosen word, such as *boat* or *choose*. At this stage it is best to use words that have only one meaning sense. Ask them to find out how many different parts there are in each entry. They should identify the headwords; some inflections or derivatives, grammar codes such as for count and non-count nouns, or for verb inflections; pronunciation; meaning; examples and so on. Ask them to think what these different parts are, and how they can help the student. To make this very clear, the teacher could enlarge an entry from

### **Orientation to an entry**

a dictionary onto handouts. Each section of the entry can be marked with an arrow, and the student would have to label each part.

**Looking for a specific meaning** Looking for meanings will be one of the major activities the students will do in their dictionary, so it is important that a lot of time is spent on increasing the success rate of this. The students need to become accustomed to selecting which of several meanings may be the most suitable. Give the students pairs of sentences where the word is the same meaning in each sentence, or different meanings. Present the students with several easy paired examples such as *I'm just going to the bank*, and *The boat moved nearer and nearer to the river bank*. If the examples are easy, the students can soon guess when the meaning is not the one that they are used to. They have to select which sentences contain words that have the same meanings, and which contain words that have different meanings. They can then guess the unknown meanings by using the guessing strategy mentioned before. It is important to remind them that they need to guess before looking in the dictionary. This also can be played as a game with teams getting points for a) a correct or near-correct guess of the meaning and b) the correct selection of the meaning in the dictionary that they decided on. It is also very important to find out what kind of mistakes students make, because the teacher needs to understand why the student made the mistakes and encourage the students to work out how it happened, rather than just give them the answer. This fosters independent dictionary work, independent language learning and lessens dependence on the teacher.

**Practice in finding words in the dictionary quickly** Students should be taught to use page headings to find words quickly. Make a list of words the students do not know but will soon meet in their textbook. Make a copy for each student. Put each word one at a time on the board. In teams students can race each other to find the words. At the end of the lesson, put the words on the board again and see if they can remember what the words mean (one point for each team). This needs to be repeated in other classes so the new words will not be forgotten. This activity builds the speed of recognizing written words, as well as building vocabulary.

This involves the students learning the phonetic symbols. These can be found inside the back of this guide, or in any Oxford University Press dictionary. One quick way to learn the phonetic symbols is to put each of them on word cards. Put one symbol on one side and some words that have these sounds on the back. The students learn them as they would learn their vocabulary word cards. It is best to learn the easy ones first, such as /b/ /t/ and /ɪ/ before difficult ones, such as /dʒ/ /j/ and the vowel sounds. An easy way to practise these symbols is to put a list of words in the middle of a page and randomly put the phonetic spelling of the words around the outside. The student has to draw a line from each English word to its phonetic spelling. When the students are good at this they can 'test' their friends in the same way.

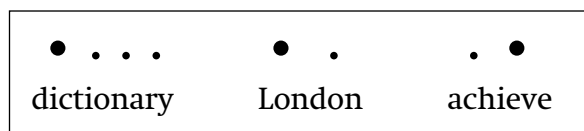
### **Finding the pronunciation from an entry**

After the students can match the phonetic code to spellings, the next stage is to help them guess the spelling of words from their sounds. When they can do this, they can then look up words they hear as well as words they read. This is quite a difficult thing to do. For example the spelling of /kɛɪk/ may start with a *c* or a *k*. However, with practice the students can get a feel for how sounds and spellings match, and then they can use their dictionary more effectively. It is always easier to start by giving them lists of regular spelling-sound combinations first, such as bank /bæŋk/ and cat /kæt/ and later move them onto more difficult ones. Later they should work with sounds that have two or more spellings such as /eɪt/ for ate and eight.

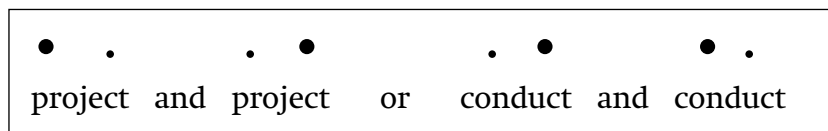
### **Finding spelling from the sound**

When learning word stress, the students have to first find how many syllables there are before they can select the correct stress. For example, government has three clusters: *go vern* and *ment*, with each one being a syllable. You will have to show them some examples. Give your students a selection of words they know and ask them to find out how many syllables there are, and where they break. Ask them to separate the word into clusters such as *con tem po ra ry*. Alternatively, you can ask them to draw little circles over each syllable. The syllable with the largest stress should be made larger, such as:

### **Noticing the word stress.**



You can then illustrate that some words have two stress or syllable patterns such as



Then give them a list of words they know that have two patterns and let them look them up. Finally, when you teach a new word, they should look up the pronunciation themselves and try to pronounce the word with the correct number of syllables and the correct stress. They should mark syllable and word stress on their word cards too.

**Problems with similar words** There are two kinds of problems. There are words which sound the same but have different spellings (*bare* and *bear*) and words which have the same spelling but different pronunciations (*read* /red/ and *read* /ri:d/). To practice these things students can play games by matching words with rhyming sounds.

**Learning to find irregular or inflected words** We have already looked at some problems that Japanese students face when looking up words. Sometimes, the word is not where they expect it to be (would they look up *unfaithful*, under u or f?), and so on. This means the students need to understand many of the easier prefixes (e.g., *un-*, *im-*, *non-*, and so on) so that the students can look up the word in the right place. They also need to know the inflections (*-ed*, *-ing*, *-s*, *-es*) and some common suffixes (such as *-ation*, *-ly*, *-er*, and *-est*). Acclimatizing them to the possibility that words may not appear where they expect them can be done by explicitly teaching them the common affix forms, and then getting the students to look up lists of words with various affixes to determine whether they appear under a separate entry, or as a sub-entry. Start with the easy ones and move to the more difficult ones later.



There are many other skills that the students need to master. Here is a short list of other skills they may need:

- Finding headwords from their derived forms
- Finding secondary meanings
- Finding nuances
- Learning how to use the cross-references in the dictionary
- Getting students to rank unknown words by importance to train them to make decisions about which words to look up in a given time.

Look in your Oxford dictionary for more ideas on helping students work with their dictionaries, and in 'Dictionaries' by Jon Wright, published by Oxford University Press.

## 14. Working with vocabulary

Fortunately, the students do not need to remember every word they meet because not all words are equally useful. But the students often do not know which ones they must learn and which ones they do not need to learn. So how do they find out which words are useful? Good modern dictionaries indicate which words are the most useful by marking the entry in some way. *Oxford Wordpower Dictionary* uses a to label the most frequent and useful words. If students see this symbol, they immediately know the word deserves a lot of attention. If the word does not have a then maybe the word does not need too much attention.

Memory research shows that if the student is forced to think about the word a lot (say, by looking at the examples and the grammar and then using it in some of their own sentences), then the word is less likely to be forgotten quickly. This explains why students engaged in a reading activity who look up a word to get a 'quick meaning' soon forget these words. The shallow level of involvement with the word in this task means that it is a likely candidate to be forgotten. One of the most frustrating things for students occurs when they look up a word, only to find that they had already marked it in their dictionary, but

## Conclusion

**Which words are important to learn?**

**Why is it that students do not always remember the words they look up?**

had forgotten all about it. The use of word cards described above and can help to solve this problem, as will a lot of fluent reading with Graded Readers.

**What are some ways to help students remember words?** Ask the student to put a ✓ next to the word each time a word is looked up. The next time the student returns to the page, they can look for the ✓ and try to refresh their memory. Alternatively they could use colored highlighters.

**Vocabulary Notebooks** Many students keep a vocabulary notebook. But what should be recorded? In the notebook, the student can write the word (and its alternate spellings), the meaning, grammatical information and so on, but the more information that is put in the notebook, the smaller chance there will be that the student will spend time trying to remember it. Therefore, just the spelling, pronunciation (if it is irregular), the meaning and the sentence in which the word was found, will usually be enough.

Usage information such as written or formal, slang, American English, etc., are worth putting in because they are good for developing language awareness and they give the word more “character.”

Japanese language teaching guides are also available for the following OUP titles

Business Venture

J-Talk

Learners' Dictionaries

New Person to Person

New Headway

Open House

Oxford Graded Readers

Passport

The Oxford Picture Dictionary

Tactics for Listening

Transitions

Words in Motion

For College EFL Professionals in Japan

*A membership organization offering service and special benefits  
for the busy college EFL profes*