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USING THE WORDWEB ONLINE DICTIONARY IN AN ESP CLASS

There are two main *directions in support of using dictionaries in the language class*. The first is that they represent useful resources for the teaching – learning process. The second refers to the fact that once the dictionary using strategies have been acquired, it provides a good tool to the learner not only during the faculty course but also at the post-course period, when the study of the language may continue autonomously. Dictionaries are a handy resource for researching a wide range of aspects: different meanings of lexical items, collocations, examples of use and standard pronunciation [1]. One condition is, though, that of receiving *training* and examples of use during the language classes, in order to develop efficient *dictionary using skills*. In this, the teacher's role is major.

Two distinctions can be made in terms of dictionary *format*, each having its own *advantages* and *disadvantages*, widely discussed both in the literature and in each concrete classroom environment. If *paper dictionaries* last for a long time, on the other hand they are sometimes unaffordable to the students, and they are sometimes quite bulky and difficult to carry/handle, which makes most learners prefer pocket editions, which cannot be too comprehensive.

Over the last years, a second category of dictionaries appeared and it is making its way quite fast to a generalized utilization – *online dictionaries*, either downloadable free, or that can be bought as CD-ROMs or obtainable online by subscription. Many traditional dictionaries have online editions. The advantageous features of such dictionaries are that they provide practically instantaneous access to the information searched, without being detrimental to the quantity and especially quality of the information they can furnish [2]. In the long lasting debate on the question *Which type of dictionaries should learners be encouraged to give priority/preference to?* there are various standpoints. Thus, some teachers opinate that, at least with lower levels of language learners, priority should be given to paper dictionaries, while others strongly encourage the use of online dictionaries [3]. One argument in favour of using online dictionaries rather than paper ones is that this may be a good way of reducing the duration of the students' long periods of silence in class while looking up words in the paper dictionary, which generates their disengagement from the communication process taking place for the solving of the task. Some authors consider this is a manner of 'liberating' the learner, by cutting the 'ombilical chord' [4]. There are people, both teachers and students, who simply prefer the feel and legibility of paper. Online dictionaries can be hard to read sometimes, in some poor lighting conditions, and for many it may really take time to learn how to use their functions.

However, as no teacher has ever actually 'banned' dictionaries from the language class, moderation and a good correlation between the purposes of using them and the amount of time allotted to this activity is advisable. Considerations regarding the frequency and speed of access are also important in opting for one or the other type of dictionaries, as well. In general, there are language class activities, such as role plays for instance, focused more on fluency and relatively free communication, for which there is general agreement that dictionary work is not acceptable – nobody actually looks up a word in the dictionary while pretending to be in a professional meeting! Therefore, teachers should be flexible and well-advised in making choices regarding the use of any kind of dictionaries and relate it to the main purpose of the activities going on.

A similar point of 'hot' debate is whether teachers should encourage their learners to use *monolingual* or *bilingual* dictionaries. Again opinions differ, but there is a general acceptance of the idea that although at the beginning of the course, therefore at lower levels of study, bilingual dictionaries are (almost) unavoidable, at intermediate/advanced levels it is better

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to encourage the students to develop the skills required in order to fully and competently use monolingual dictionaries. In teaching ESP, though, we should emphasize that a rich specialized dictionary can be of much use for classes focused, for instance, on making technical translations, particularly with students such as those in the educational context described here (Computer Science Faculty ones), as the language course is taken in the first two faculty years, when their grasp of the IT domain is generally not yet at its full development point, although in this field the students' knowledge from the very beginning of their tertiary education phase is considerably higher than that of other engineering students of different profiles, such as mechanical engineering, for example. Another case in which dictionaries are recommended for the English language class activity at all levels is that of teaching/learning *collocations*, as they are the only reliable source for such patterns of the native speakers' usage of lexis. Again, online dictionaries and other sites presenting collocations are more comprehensive than the printed paper ones – some at over 100,000 or more entries, barely comparable even with well-reputed paper collocation dictionaries, such as *Oxford Collocations Dictionary for students of English*, 2002, which has 9,000 headwords.

A preliminary conclusion at this moment is that teachers should not neglect teaching dictionary use skills. It is a natural part of any course that needs to receive appropriate emphasis and time. There are several clear cut areas in which dictionaries are of use [5]: checking spelling, phonology, parts of speech and noun plurals, head words, instances of word usage, finding difficult words, capitalization, glossary, origin of words etc. However, not all learners are taught how to exploit these features; thus, they simply limit themselves to a mere finding out of the meanings of a word/phrase or checking their spelling. A lot more information can be obtained once the students have developed the abilities of using dictionaries to the maximum of their possibilities. A variety of *kinds* of dictionaries can be successfully used in the language class, depending on the *objectives* established. With ESP students, at least the following types, which are mentioned only as a mere illustration of the existing diversity of dictionaries, are of high potential benefit for the learners: Maths dictionaries, Illustrated dictionaries, Special subject dictionaries etc.

Entering the English class, one can see the *versatile* manners of putting dictionaries to work. Useful didactic advice on how to develop the students' skills in using dictionaries is provided by the authors of important online and paper dictionaries, as well as by the pedagogical literature in the field [6]. There should always exist a strong rationale underlying each of the teacher's options in dictionary skills development in the language class. A first step is to identify challenging ways of training the students in using dictionaries. Their attention should be directed to the dictionary layout information, as displayed in a typical entry. Dictionary quizzes of the True/False type can be designed, as well as other activities that turn the users of the dictionary more familiar with its possibilities. *Key skills* in *effective dictionary use* are: recognizing features of dictionary layout, such as use of alphabetical order, headwords, grammar and pronunciation information; understanding the way dictionary entries are coded; discriminating between the different meanings of a word, especially a word with many polysemes or words that are homonyms; cross-checking (when using a bilingual dictionary) that the translation equivalent that is offered is the best choice for the meaning that is required; using synonyms, antonyms and other information to narrow the choice of best word for the meaning intended; inferring the spelling of an unfamiliar word from only having heard it, in order to check its meaning in the dictionary. The teacher should encourage the use of the dictionary at the self-correcting stage of their written work and mostly during the process of writing itself. When they are listening to an input text, the learners should be encouraged to guess the spelling of unknown words occurring in that text. If the students are using dictionaries as a main activity, which is a recommendable stage with most categories of learners, it is important that they should be given precise tasks against a time limit, in order to avoid that they get slowed down with details, as most dictionaries are, for motivated students, quite a captivating source of information.

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Specific, well-explained *tasks* are necessary, which should go beyond the 'traditional' having a list of new words and looking them up. Thus, *spelling* is one of the main directions of use; students can check the two or more correct spellings of a word or see the spelling differences between British and American English, for instance. *Thesaurus* dictionaries will help the learners to find the words needed to express themselves more effectively and more interestingly; avoid repeating the same words monotonously; avoid clichés; recall the word that is on the tip of their tongue; find the word that suits the genre (type of writing e.g.: a letter), *purpose*, intended *audience* and *context* of what they are writing. It is important that dictionaries be used *productively*, viz. for both generating text and as resources for vocabulary acquisition. Their usefulness depends on learners being able to access the information.

As far as *online dictionaries use* is concerned, several *steps* are recommended: to determine whether there is paid membership, with the implied possibilities and advantages involved, or the resource can be used free; to start from using a good search engine, giving the phrase and analyzing what it returns – there are approximately 51,000,000 results from which one has to choose; a preferred website can be selected and the term searched for can be entered in the search bar; the results of the word searched are then browsed to find as much as possible about it. This will cover multiple definitions, grammar rules, variations of the word, synonyms, antonyms and proper part of speech; to maximize the use of such a tool the online dictionary can be combined with an online thesaurus; a dictionary search engine can be chosen that shows *definitions from many websites at once*, thus narrowing the search by pulling up only web dictionaries.

It is certainly of interest to briefly analyze the place and use of dictionaries against the educational framework from the *perspective of dictionary makers – lexicographers*, as well [7]. It is pointed out that, although a dictionary is a complex assembly of difficult to understand facts, as it is full of abbreviations, references and concepts that are not easy to understand by the common user (and for bilingual dictionaries the situation is ever more difficult, as almost 50% of its contents are necessarily unfamiliar to the reader), there are rather few teachers who teach dictionary use skills and strategies systematically. There will always be the question for them referring to *what kind of dictionaries sells best* - and, although lexicographers try to permanently improve their laborious work, this is not really rewarded by the commercial success of their products, due, according to the general belief, to the fact that dictionary users do not get the best out of their dictionaries, and, conversely, that dictionaries themselves could be improved so as to serve their users better. Research is still needed on the various specific *dictionary consultation related options, skills, methods* and even *attitudes*.

Online dictionaries can provide a really amazing *number of facilities* to be used by those interested in it. (In fact, in my capacity as a teacher reflecting on this issue and editing the present paper, I am myself making use, in various ways, of at least one online dictionary, for lexical, grammatical, thesaurus and other purposes!) An obvious *merit* of the new communication technology - a revolution has started in the development of *aids* to *autonomous learning* [8]. This will enable learners to immerse themselves in the target language in a multimedia language laboratory, wherever they are physically. The authors point out that, according to their experiments, the average looking-up time for ten words using a paper dictionary was 168 seconds, with about 17 seconds per one word, while online it took the subjects only 130 seconds to perform the same operation, with approximately 13 seconds per word, which means by 23% faster than with the 'good old traditional' paper printed tools. An interesting remark the quoted authors make is that, as at present online dictionaries are still very much *paper ones online*, in point of their conception and structure, people tend to use them in roughly the same way as the traditional technology on paper, in spite of the *new unique functions* they have, such as error tolerant input, cross-referencing (synonyms and antonyms, for instance) or word and spelling games.

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Therefore, *should we or should we not advise our learners to buy and/or use such a tool?* In spite of some (not very numerous) cases, the students in the educational context described are not at all reluctant to online dictionaries, as some other learners may be due to various causes. On the contrary, they manifest *openness* and they are *technically highly skilled* to use them appropriately and to the best of their capacity. When discussing the vast number of *possibilities* provided by online dictionaries, we should point out that it is the teacher's role to learn about them and demonstrate the way they should be used in the teaching – learning process, making systematic use of such tools in the language class. In pleading *for* the use of online dictionaries several aspects are of significance. Thus, when searches on the Internet are made [9] (http://www.clearenglish.net/resources.php), they return long lists of General English and/or Translation Dictionaries. Another site [10] alphabetically lists 116 entries interesting for an ESP class, of which the following are presented here:

- *Encarta® World English Dictionary, North American Edition: [107301 words]*
- *Cambridge International Dictionary of English: [66408 words]*
- *Wiktionary: [580200 words]*

The speed and scope of the search are indeed amazing, with 13,587,880 words identifiable in 1024 dictionaries indexed! Some other sites [11] also add a short presentation of the online lexicographic resources, making mentions about the number of entries, the general content and features they are equipped with. An illustration is presented below:

> *OneLook Dictionaries Dictionary search service that offers definitions from a variety of online English and foreign language dictionaries. Find the definition of a term, see terms that correspond to definition key words, or search for the correct spelling of a word. www.onelook.com*

America's most comprehensive dictionary [12] is fully searchable online and includes: more than 263,000 main entries; 476,000 entries; 700,000 definitions; 143,000 etymologies; 100,000 quotations; 107,000 verbal illustrations; 3,100 pictorial illustrations. The return of one search on Google (www.google.com) provides 1210 dictionary categories and it is completed in 0.837 seconds. Searching for an IT term, viz. the word *electronic*, on a site maintained by The English Language Centre (2003), returns 31 dictionaries with English definitions which include that word, out of which: General (20 matching dictionaries); Business (2); Computing (2); Science (1); Tech (3). The following *Quick definitions* were obtained for the lexeme *electronic*: 1) *adjective***:** of or relating to electronics; concerned with or using devices that operate on principles governing the behavior of electrons ("*Electronic devices*") and 2) *adjective***:** of or concerned with electrons ("*Electronic energy*").

Numerous universities have *advanced study skills programs* that necessarily include information on how to use dictionaries faster and on ways and means of improving one's vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation and writing by the correct use of online resources.

In the educational context presented, I make use especially of the *WordWeb Online* dictionary. It is a free downloadable product, with possibilities which can be very useful in the teaching – learning of ESP, first of all as it comprises numerous very complete definitions and instances of use for IT terms, as well as for General English. My approach to using it relies on a double perspective. On the one hand, the kind of support this dictionary provides to me as a teacher in the IT classroom: fast access to word spelling, audio pronunciation and its phonetic transcription, synonyms/antonyms, provision of the larger domain(s) which the entry belongs to, copy/paste of definitions, instances of use of each word, grammatical categories it takes, possibility of approximating spelling to the closest word in the entry list, history and reversibility of searches.

On the other hand, by using it in various moments and for various purposes in class, I provide my students examples of good dictionary user's practices, which they can further develop, thus enhancing their learning process quality. Thus, the online dictionary is used

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when correction of *pronunciation* is intended in class. In time, my students have 'befriended' with the voice uttering the words; they even tend to repeat the pronunciation without being told to. Checking *spelling* or the looking for the words *meanings* can be done by simply selecting the entry displayed on the computer monitor/on screen in class, and the dictionary gets you to it. For *process writing* classes, this resource is really of much use, providing ranges of synonyms/antonyms. My students have also been taught how to develop a well-informed approach to making *technical translations* using the online dictionary support. The WordWeb Online dictionary has the capacity of showing the user the *family of words* the entry they are interested in belongs to. Results appear almost instantaneously, so *searching time* is practically fractions of seconds, which prevents the displacement of attention from the task being solved.

This example is based on a personal option, but with it, as well as with numerous other similar online dictionaries, a conclusion emerges, viz. that by encouraging the intelligent and skilled use of dictionaries, there are high chances that the students may become more *independent learners*, which is one of our core goals as language teachers.

NOTE

[1] Hayton, 2006.
[2] Yonally and Gilfert, 1995
[3] Sharma, 2009
[4] Sharma, op. cit.
[5] Learning Centre and Information Centre, 2006
[6] Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary *Worksheets*, 2008; Sharma, 2009; Thornbury, 2002; eHow Internet Editor, 2008
[7] Atkins, 1998
[8] Weschler and Pitts, 2000
[9] http://www.clearenglish.net/resources.php
[10] http://www.onelook.com/browse.shtml
[11] http://dir.yahoo.com/reference/dictionaries/
[12] Webster's Third New International Dictionary, Unabridged (2009), http://www.merriam-webster.com/

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REZUMAT

Există în momentul de față o impresionantă varietate de dicționare de limbă engleză disponibile online. Prin urmare, factorul determinant în formularea opțiunilor profesorului de limba engleză în favoarea unuia sau altuia dintre acestea este reprezentat de paleta de posibilități pe care ele o oferă şi care trebuie să răspundă opțiunilor sale didactice cât mai bine. O scurtă trecere în revistă a facilităților specifice fiecăruia dintre cele mai importante dicționare online de limbă engleză este realizată, cu explorarea, în partea finală, a modalităților concrete de utilizare în cursul practic de limba engleză pentru ştiință şi tehnologie a dicționarului WordWeb Online, în predarea şi dezvoltarea principalelor abilități de limbă, a lexisului, pronunției şi elementelor de susținere gramaticală, precum şi a abilităților de studiu academic independent, vizându-se astfel o contribuție către autonomizarea în învățare a viitorului absolvent de învățământ superior nefilologic (ingineresc).

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