

Criteria for Selecting a Monolingual Dictionary for Learners

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Abstract

There are a bewildering number of monolingual dictionaries on the market in Japan, including new learner dictionaries which give students a great deal of potentially useful information about how to use words. However it is essential to carefully evaluate dictionaries to ensure that they meet the needs of the learners who will use them. This article sets out some criteria to help make such decisions.

Key words

monolingual dictionaries, learner dictionaries, language learning

Introduction

Many language teachers believe that the use of monolingual dictionaries contributes more to vocabulary learning than do bilingual dictionaries because the process of understanding the definition and examples involves deeper mental processing and is therefore more memorable. As a result many teachers in Japan, especially native speakers of English, advocate the use of monolingual dictionaries and some go so far as to require students to bring them to their classes. However selecting a suitable dictionary is not an easy task. There are many dictionaries on the market and learners often lack the English skills needed to evaluate a dictionary. Teachers, especially native speakers, have a different problem when asked to advise on a dictionary: a dictionary which seems ideal to them may not be understandable to their students.

The requirements for dictionaries for language learners are very different from those for dictionaries intended for native speakers. The top priority of language learners is clear definitions in simple English - whereas native speakers need very precise definitions and extensive coverage of low-frequency vocabulary. Students need a lot of information about a word, such as its collocations. Native speakers usually just want the spelling and a definition or a synonym. The differences also extend to the physical properties of the dictionary; native speakers use dictionaries as an occasional reference, learners will thumb through the

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dictionary looking up words for extended periods and then jam it into a bag to commute home. The following criteria are intended to help teachers and learners select monolingual dictionaries which suit the needs of learners. This article has its origins in the work of the dictionary committee at Phillips University, Japan. (Rogers, Rice and Lee, 1993)

Criteria

The Headwords

Obviously a large number of headwords is a desirable feature of a dictionary, but to what extent should this be at the expense of space for definitions and examples, clear type, robust pages, and light weight? Which words should be listed? Should priority be given to low frequency vocabulary, current expressions, idioms or widely used slang? Should the standard variety of English for headwords be British or American, or both? These are some of the questions which the writer of a dictionary for learners must answer and inevitably compromise on.

Purchasers would do well to be wary of publishers' claims for numbers of words. They may refer to headwords or words in bold type. There is just no substitute for looking up a number of words before purchase. A technique for checking coverage of low-frequency words is to go through the alphabet thinking of words that *should* be in the dictionary and some more that *might* be in it and then look them up. It is important not to just flick through the book being impressed by the entries - there may be important omissions.

Slang and current expressions are important for work with screenplays, magazines, and newspapers. Even a recently revised dictionary may not be up-to-date. Again, the only way to check is to look up some words in the dictionary. Good sources of words to check would be the newspapers, magazines etc. With this in mind, a small list of such words is provided in the appendix of this article.

The official standard in Japan is American English, but British English still enjoys considerable prestige at the university level. Ideally a dictionary should have both British and American spellings in headwords and note any spelling and/or pronunciation differences.

Definitions

Definitions in a dictionary for students must be clear, use simple language, and should not generally contain the word being defined. Some learners' dictionaries write all their definitions within a limited vocabulary, but while this usually helps make definitions more understandable, it may sometimes make them more complex (Carter and McCarthy, 1988). Dictionaries which use a defining vocabulary (Longman's Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1993; Cambridge International Dictionary of English, 1995) will usually list it in the

back of the dictionary. The Collins Cobuild Essential English Dictionary (1988) takes a compromise approach by not having a fixed defining vocabulary, but by printing a list at the back of the dictionary of words which occur more than ten times in citations. Such lists are not only useful for study to improve learners' ability to use the dictionary, but may also be used to evaluate the vocabulary used in definitions and citations.

It is essential to check that the definitions of a dictionary are understandable to learners. If they are not, and then learners may be better to use a bilingual dictionary or a monolingual dictionary with Japanese annotations than buy a monolingual dictionary and either not use it, or find it difficult and demoralizing to use.

When evaluating the comprehensibility of definitions for learners, it is important to remember that there are features of English which seem simple to native speakers and learners of English as a second language, but which may be extremely difficult for learners of English as a foreign language. An example would be phrasal verbs such as *to turn up* (= *arrive at*) or *call off*.

Definitions to beware of are those where phrases like *the state of*, *the condition of*, or *the act of* occur frequently. These are generally unhelpful to EFL learners. Synonyms can be useful, but only when known to the learner. Synonyms in some dictionaries are more difficult than the word that they define! Also problematic is the persistent use of *ones* in definitions. This gives learners the impression that *ones* is widely used in English, whereas it is restricted to people with high social status, people with pretensions of high status, and jokes about social status. Good dictionaries tell learners this and do not mislead them.

Other Information for Learners

A feature of monolingual learner dictionaries is the amount of information they offer the learner to enable productive use of words. As in almost all dictionaries, the part of speech and pronunciation are shown, but information about collocations, associated prepositions, countable or uncountable, false friends (loan words from the learner's native language), connotations, and transitivity may also be listed. The more modern learner dictionaries give most of this information, especially for high frequency words.

However Béjoint (1979, 1981) suggests that learners seldom use dictionaries to obtain this kind of information. Summers (1988) suggests that this is because teachers fail to train students in the use of a learner dictionary, assuming that they know how to use a dictionary because of their L1 dictionary experience whereas use of a learner dictionary is quite different. This may be changing as students become more familiar with the kind of information available in learner dictionaries.

Instructions on How to Use the Dictionary

Because the newer learner dictionaries give far more information about how to use

words than traditional dictionaries, learning how to use the dictionary effectively is important. All monolingual dictionaries list a key to the codes or abbreviations used, but the larger desk and hard-bound editions have additional detailed instructions on how to use the dictionary. Sometimes this means that students need to know or learn a good deal of metalanguage. For example, the Collins Cobuild Student's Dictionary (1990) uses terms such as *adjunct* and *predeterminer* in the key to the abbreviations. In contrast, the Cambridge International Dictionary of English (1995) gives detailed information in simple language about the nature and function of the different parts of speech.

The amount of time, which must be spent in learning how to use a dictionary, should be considered when evaluating a dictionary, especially on for use in the classroom where time is limited.

'Monolingual' Dictionaries with Japanese Annotations

The intended purpose of the Japanese annotations in these dictionaries is to help learners distinguish between different meanings of the same word, but they also have the benefit of offering the learner first language support if they cannot understand the definition. Published by Obunsha (Obunsha's Senior English Dictionary, 1978), Sanseido (Sanseido's Concise English Dictionary, 1978) and Kenkyusha (1986), these dictionaries are traditional monolingual dictionaries with the addition of annotations for the benefit of learners. Three such dictionaries are compared in Appendix 2.

Examples

Most dictionaries give examples to guide learners, and research at Longman (Summers, 1988) showed no significant difference between definitions alone, definitions plus examples, and examples alone in contribution to comprehension of a reading passage. Example sentences show a word in context and are especially useful for illustrating the meaning of abstract words which are notoriously difficult to define without using vocabulary more difficult than the word itself.

Dictionaries which are written using language databases have a major advantage over their competitors here because they can use common examples from real text or speech. This gets around a problem with some Japanese dictionaries of stilted, archaic or unnatural, and occasionally incorrect examples. Although in practice there have been complaints from Japanese students that the examples in some learner dictionaries are too difficult for them.

Readability and Layout

The readability and layout of a dictionary is important. Headwords, definitions, examples and grammatical information should be distinguished by a different font or style. The text should not look cluttered and it should be easy to scan up and down the page

looking for headwords. As a rule of thumb, if readability and layout are not intrusive, they are probably good!

Size and Weight

The size and weight of a dictionary is extremely important in Japan where high school and university students often have to commute long distance by train and bus. Unfortunately a side effect of the greater quantity of information and support for learners in the newer learner dictionaries has been an increase in size. This means that students should perhaps consider buying a desk dictionary for home use and a compact version to carry around. In fact, because it takes time to become used to the layout, abbreviations and contractions used in a dictionary, it may make sense to buy desk and concise versions of the same dictionary.

Durability and Cost

As mentioned earlier, learner dictionaries are subject to more frequent and rougher use than dictionaries intended for native speakers, but, surprisingly, paperback editions are still common. Although commendably cheap (for example the Collins Cobuild Student's Dictionary costs ¥1700), paperbacks, especially thick ones, do not last well. It seems that monolingual learner dictionaries from overseas are often marketed in paperback editions in Japan, even though vinyl bound editions are also listed as being in print.

Taking the Learner into Account

It is important to remember that there is no single best dictionary as such. The newer learner dictionaries offer the student an unprecedented amount of information about words and how to use them, but this may go unused or may be difficult for some to understand. The best dictionary is the one that matches the needs of the learner. This will depend on learner level and motivation, the skill to be studied, budget and even commuting distance and availability of lockers at school or university.

Conclusion

There has been a revolution in learner dictionaries in recent years. This reflects a shift in the perceived role of dictionaries from authoritative references giving the meaning of 'hard' words to sources of information on how to use words productively. This support and learning role has the important effect of increasing learner autonomy by reducing their dependence on teachers, texts and classrooms.

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Appendix 1:A List of Words for Testing the Coverage and Currency of Headwords in Learner Dictionaries

New Words

arbitrage	leverage(d buyout)
cyberspace	microwave oven
detox(ification)	muesli
diss (= to 'disrespect', i.e. insult)	online
facsimile, fax	politically correct
gel (= hair styling gel)	prion
grunge (rock)	real-time
high-tech	substance abuse
HIV	underachiever
botox (botulinum toxin treatment)	yuppie

Slang

ass (= buttocks, fool)	stoned (on drugs)
barf	creep
cool	honky
dread (= fashionable)	geek
dude	jive

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gay (= homosexual)	naf
bimbo	nerd
gross	straight (= not gay, conservative)
vibe(s)	turkey (= fool)

Taboo Words and Obscenities

Learners may need to know the many and various meanings, collocations, and connotations of obscenities. There are also taboo words such as *negro* and *nigger*. These should be listed with a clear warning about using them, some dictionaries omit the warning and hence imply that these are normal words, whereas their use is, at best, hurtful to others and potentially dangerous to the speaker.

Appendix 2 A Comparison of Three Monolingual Dictionaries

●●●●●●	Excellent,
●●●●●	Very good
●●●●	Good
●●●	Mediocre
●●	Unsatisfactory

	<i>Obunsha Senior</i>	<i>Sanseido Concise</i>	<i>Kenkyusha's New Collegiate</i>
Sufficient entries	●●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●
Other meanings of headwords	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●●
Comprehensible definitions	●●●●●	●●●●	●●●●
Parts of speech indicated	√	√	√
Inflected forms shown	√(separate listings)	√	√
Example sentences	●●●●	●●●●	●●●●●
Headwords with Am. spellings	√	× listed after, bold	× listed after, bold
Phonetic script ¹	I.P.A./D. Jones (Br.)	modified I.P.A.	I.P.A./D. Jones (Br.)
Japanese annotations	√	√	√ ²
Readability (Font, print size, layout)	●●●●● ³	●●●●	●●●●
Portability (size, weight)	●●●●●	●●●●●●	●●●●
Durability (binding, box, cover)	●●●●●	●●●●●	●●●●●
Cost	¥2,250	¥3,000	¥2,800

- 1 I.P.A. - the International Phonetic Alphabet, European in origin.
- 2 D. Jones-A British English alphabet derived from *A Pronouncing Dictionary of English* by Daniel Jones.
- 2 The *Kenkyusha* uses Japanese annotations only for some scientific and technical terms.
- 3 The *Obunsha* has far more comprehensive Japanese annotations than the other two and places them in a separate column to the right of the English definition.