

On Dictionary Use by Slovak and Polish Teacher Trainees

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Abstract

A survey was conducted among English teacher trainees in selected Slovak and Polish university settings. The aim of the probe was to collect relevant data concerning dictionary reference proficiency among the two trainee populations. The investigation was executed by means of a questionnaire given to undergraduate university students to complete. In total, 22 questions covered a number of issues, from dictionary ownership to students' views on the role and use of dictionaries in learning a foreign language. The analysis of obtained information enabled us to identify areas in which improvement seems to be necessary for our respondents to become more effective dictionary users. On this basis an attempt was made to outline a set of recommendations on how to increase dictionary awareness and improve instruction in the required dictionary reference skills in higher education curricula for language learning in the two countries under focus.

1. Introduction

It is an undisputable fact that dictionaries are essential tools for effective foreign language learning, particularly in the pedagogic situations when the teaching-learning process cannot count on the support of a target language environment. Taking advantage of the information compilers put into dictionaries requires (a) an understanding of their value as well as limitations (dictionary awareness); (b) specific skills enabling the user to find the information searched for and, once found, extensive knowledge of the lexicographic conventions used in order to interpret it properly and integrate it into the context which prompted the search (reference skills).¹ Understandably, developing both is particularly important in the case of the user population in question, partly because of the limitations to their linguistic competence (cf. Passarotto 2007: 17).² Next, “the dictionary knowledge” gained in the course of one’s studies is essential if teacher trainees are to teach dictionary skills to their own students in the future, a fact stressed by, among others, Béjoint (1989: 208).

Regrettably, however, in spite of ample empirical evidence that learners do not always use dictionaries in the way intended by dictionary compilers (Béjoint 1989: 208), little or no provision is currently made for increasing dictionary awareness in the curricula for future foreign language teachers (Brumfit 1985: v; Cowie 1999: 192; Hartmann 2001: 139). It is a deep-held conviction on the part of the authors of the present study that colleges and universities, such as those we represent, can no longer remain aloof to this evidence.

The present paper, by no means aspiring to become a final word on the subject, is an attempt to contribute to the body of studies such as the Thematic Network Project (1999) which take up the topic of dictionary use from the perspective of students of modern foreign languages in different national settings. As regards its potential ‘practical’ significance, it is felt that it may provide a useful starting point for those tertiary level teachers who notice their students could indeed benefit from training in dictionary use, but need some guidance on specific objectives to be established for this highly specific user population.

2. Aims

Since none of the existing studies has contributed significantly to revealing a profile of Slovak and Polish university students as dictionary users, preliminary studies such as the present research attempt will, by nature, result in a broad-brush rather than a detailed picture.³ At the

same time, the authors feel confident that even at this preliminary stage, many of the categories used in the questionnaire (e.g. the widespread use of electronic dictionaries in relation to the ability to find information in a traditional paper dictionary) allow for a more detailed cross-classification of findings (a few suggestions on the possible correlation between certain questions are listed below, but individual teachers may well discover other patterns are also possible). At any rate, the user profile we aim at, will, hopefully, provide some food for thought regarding one's current in-class policy on dictionary use and its possible implications for the students' ability to use the dictionary.

Drawing on a number of guidelines concerning research on conditions of dictionary use as proposed by Hartmann (2001: 81), we agree that the following parameters could be taken into account while characterising the two user populations in question:

- types of dictionaries consulted
- various types of activities requiring dictionary use
- various types of strategies used when working with dictionaries.

We assumed that the questions to be asked would have to be broad enough to be applied to a maximum number of contexts, and yet specific enough to provide tangible evidence on which aspects of current classroom policy on dictionary use might have to be altered/modified. As a result, the two user populations will be further characterised in terms of:

- past experience in dictionary use (Question 1), and the way it may affect their 'buyer behaviour' (Questions 6-7), or the students' perception of dictionary consultation (Question 18);
- current ownership (Questions 2-4), including the number and types (number of languages; general/specialised; print/electronic) of dictionaries owned;
- current frequency of use by dictionary type (Question 5);
- students' buyer behaviour (Questions 6-7);
- students' awareness of the outside matter (Questions 8-9), possibly in correlation with the amount of training in dictionary use they received (Question 20);
- conditions of use involving specific contexts involving dictionary use (Question 10) and their possible implications for teaching dictionary skills, including, among others, current classroom policy on dictionary use;
- specific activity contexts in which students use dictionaries (Questions 11 and 13);
- specific strategies used for handling new vocabulary items (Question 12);
- the most often consulted information categories (Question 13);
- students' own perceptions of themselves as dictionary users including (a) the level of satisfaction with their reference skills (Question 14); (b) potential difficulties encountered while trying to find the information searched for (Question 15) and the type of information which they think is most difficult to find (Question 16); (c) the potential causes of such difficulties (Question 17) with, again, potentially wide-ranging implications for both lexicography and the pedagogy of dictionary use;
- students' overall perception of dictionaries, including (a) whether using dictionaries is considered worthwhile (Question 18); (b) the role a dictionary can play in the process of learning a foreign language (Question 19); (c) the amount of training in dictionary use they received (Question 20) and (d) whether they consider this kind of training important.

Let us take these questions one by one.

3. Analysis of the questionnaire results

1. The majority of Slovak university students started to use dictionaries as early as at primary school (80 %); the remaining part at secondary school (14 %). The ratio was a little different with Polish students of which only 62 % report primary school and 27 % secondary school. This imbalance between the two target groups may be caused by the differences in the national system of primary and secondary education as for the beginning of foreign language instruction.
2. As might be expected, the students own many types of dictionaries, but the most popular of them are bilingual dictionaries (SK 97 %, PL 95 %) and monolingual dictionaries (SK 83 %, PL 91 %). About 30 % of all the students own thesauri and between 30 % (SK) and 20 % (PL) also own special subject dictionaries. Quite a number of Polish students (40 %) report ownership of encyclopaedia which contrasts with their Slovak counterparts' figure (16 %).
3. It seems that electronic dictionaries are the most popular lexicographical tools among university students. Almost 97 % of Slovak and 79 % of Polish students claim using them. Pocket calculators are very rare (SK 5 %, PL 9 %).
4. The respondents own between 1 to 10 dictionaries, but 5 on average.
5. While Slovak students report bilingual dictionary as the one that is most frequently used (81 %) and general dictionary is reported as the second one (55 %), Polish students seem to slightly prefer the use of general dictionaries (67 %) to bilingual dictionaries (62 %). The use of thesauri is very limited in both groups (SK 11 %, PL 4 %) and so is the use of special subject dictionaries (SK 8 %, PL 0 %) and encyclopaedia (2 %).
6. The students' decision to buy a dictionary was either the result of their deliberate choice (SK 49 %, PL 71 %) or the stimulus came from a teacher (SK 33 %, PL 13 %).
7. When buying a new dictionary, the students make their decisions with regard to their own needs (SK 77 %, PL 89 %), while taking into account the number of words (SK 56 %, PL 40 %) and the price (SK 42 %, PL 27 %). The reputation of the publisher also plays its role (SK 31 %, PL 29 %).
8. As far as the use of dictionary appendices is concerned, the two groups of respondents differ somewhat. Slovak students most frequently consult the list of irregular verbs (77 %) and the list of abbreviations (63 %); for the Polish students, the latter seem to be more targeted (69 %) as well as looking up proper names (62 %). Only then the lists of irregular verbs rank (58 %).
9. Studying the user guidance notes at the front of the dictionary is definitely not very popular among all the students (SK 7 %, PL 15 %); on the contrary, from 49 % (SK) to 52 % (PL) students feel that they can manage without them, although they find them user-friendly (SK 42 %, PL 49 %).
10. The students' responses confirm our expectation that they use dictionaries mostly when studying at home (97 %), occasionally before an exam (SK 37 %, PL 29 %), before a class (SK 19 %, PL 31 %) or in a library (SK 27 %, 11 %).
11. The survey results also clearly show that the students use their dictionaries mainly while working on a translation exercise (SK 92 %, PL 89 %) or on a written assignment (SK 87 %, 80 %). It seems that reading textbooks also requires frequent use of dictionaries (SK 55 %, PL 58 %) and reading academic journals and books for entertainment create additional opportunities for using dictionaries (33-42 %).
12. The respondents admit that when they notice a new or difficult word while reading, they usually look it up in a dictionary (SK 75 %, PL 64 %), but also try to guess the meaning (SK 64 %, 55 %). Interestingly enough, almost 27 % of Slovak students report ignoring unknown words, which contrasts with only 6 % on the Polish side.

13. A remarkable conformity between the two groups of respondents may be noted in the following areas. Both groups report that they use dictionaries mainly when writing (SK 83 %, PL 89 %) or reading (SK 72 %, PL 73 %). The purpose for consulting a dictionary is first of all to look up a meaning of a word (SK 91 %, PL 95 %), its pronunciation (SK 72 %, PL 75 %), a word's use (SK 66 %, PL 68 %), a spelling of a word (SK 61 %, PL 71 %), and synonyms (SK 46 %, PL 62 %). To look up a grammar point does not seem to be very frequent (SK 30 %, PL 22 %).
14. On the whole, the students are satisfied with their abilities to use a dictionary (SK 64 %, PL 78 %), or satisfied to a certain extent (SK 25 %, PL 22 %), which may suggest an exaggerated feeling of self-confidence.
15. They admit, however, that sometimes they consult a dictionary without being able to find the information (SK 77 %, PL 75 %).
16. For Slovak respondents, the most difficult areas to find in dictionaries are idioms and phrases (SK 78 %, PL 35 %), while for the Polish learners specialized or technical terms cause most difficulties (PL 53 %, SK 55 %). Common English words in a special subject area rank as third (SK 33 %, PL 44 %).
17. In the students' opinion, the difficulties are caused by a lack of information in the dictionary (SK 79 %, PL 55 %) and Polish learners also blame unclear layout of the dictionary (35 %).
18. On the whole, using dictionaries is reported as worthwhile/informative (SK 69 %, PL 80 %) and easy (SK 48 %, PL 55 %).
19. All the respondents believe that using dictionaries can improve their writing skills (SK 72 %, PL 80 %) and help them perform better in their studies (SK 63 %, PL 80 %). Some difference was found between the Slovak 2nd year students who also believe that their reading can be improved (65 %), while the Slovak 3rd year students expect improvement in their speaking (79 %). The Polish group expects improvement of their reading skills (66 %) and speaking (55 %).
20. One of the most important findings regards instruction in dictionary use. The survey has revealed that only 24 % of Slovak students have been instructed on how to use a dictionary, 47 % acknowledge some instruction, and the rest (27 %) claim that they have never been instructed. The majority of the Polish students (73 %) report that they have been taught how to use dictionaries, some admit little guidance (24 %) and there is only one student who lacked any training.
21. An indication of a different attitude about the dictionary use by the two groups of university students may also be seen in the response to the last question. While the majority of Polish students think that it is very important in their subject to be taught how to use dictionaries (53 %), only 27 % of their Slovak counterparts are of the same opinion. The rest do think that it is important (SK 47 %, PL 44 %). None of the respondents reports that instruction in using dictionaries is not important.

4. Recommendations

Based on what was said above, an attempt can now be made to outline a set of recommendations on how to increase dictionary awareness and improve instruction in the required dictionary reference skills in higher education curricula for language learning in the two countries under focus.

1. Polish tertiary level teachers in particular must assume relatively little previous dictionary exposure on the part of a certain number of students (Question 1). In one of the author's experience, it is not uncommon for individual students to lack even those reference skills which Béjoint (1989: 210) classifies as basic, for instance finding a lexical item in the

dictionary, obviously drawing on the mastery of the alphabetical ordering of headwords, or (at the microstructural level) finding a piece of information in the entry. While establishing particular objectives for their in-class policy on dictionary use, tertiary level teachers should also remember that using a dictionary is a complex process (Béjoint 1989: 209, drawing on studies such as Scholfield 1982, Hartmann 1987 or Whitcut 1986), a fact ‘underestimated by teachers and students alike’ (Hartmann 1987: 147).

2. At least some Slovak and Polish teachers may have to re-examine their current position on the use of a bilingual dictionary – by far the most frequently owned dictionary type – by their students (Question 2). It is commonly acknowledged that students’ and teachers’ preferences on this matter differ (Koren 2007: 2). At the same time, research shows that *all* dictionaries, including the types preferred by the teacher and the educationalist, may promote errors (e.g. misinterpreting some of the information included) and there is still too little evidence on the “superiority” of a particular dictionary type. All teachers could, therefore, think carefully of the implications following from a piece of advice given by Hatherall (1984: 183), which, in our context, would entail sitting down to a writing or a reading task “incorporating a language [with which they are] not very familiar” and observing whether their own user behaviour entails *the same dictionary types* as those the use of which they advocate so strongly.
3. The use of thesauri (Question 5) by less than one third of both populations may be a source for concern, especially on the part of those teachers who constantly remind the students of the need to make their compositions ‘more interesting’. As regards special subject dictionaries, the results obtained are hardly surprising given a large majority of classes taken involves general English and that price is listed as one of the factors on which students base a decision whether to buy or not to buy.
4. A comparison of this and similar studies shows that different national settings differ widely in terms of guidance (Question 6) students are given about which dictionary type to choose. A general tendency seems to be for monolingual dictionaries to be purchased following a teacher’s recommendation. The fact that *not every* Slovak or Polish student reports having a monolingual dictionary (or a bilingual dictionary) corresponds with the results obtained by Hartmann who states that ‘dictionaries [...] are rarely part of departmental policy, or specified in student handbooks or module descriptions.’ (Hartmann 2001: 139) This, in turn, puts European universities in a marked contrast with American schools, where “English departments [...] typically require that students [...] buy a mandated dictionary, or choose one from a list of [...] ‘college dictionaries’” (McCreary and Dolezal 1999: 108).
5. Greater attention should be drawn by individual teachers (both Slovak and Polish) to those elements in the user’s guide (Question 9) which may prove of use within the context of their particular subjects and hence specific activities students engage in on a daily basis, especially since there is considerable doubt about the informative value of some of the guides. At any rate, the results obtained place the Slovak and Polish population somewhere between, for instance, Béjoint (1981), where only 11 per cent of the subjects read the introductory matter, and Bareggi (1989), where the instructions were read by 23 per cent of users.
6. The students’ responses to Question 10 are particularly revealing and definitely require further research on the dictionary’s status and function (Cowie 1999: 182). As aptly noted by Marengo (1989: 110), the majority of students ‘still have a perception of the dictionary [...] which is far from “instrumental”, treating it as ‘a storehouse of meanings rather than a resource for developing [language] activities’ (Marengo, cited in Cowie 1999: 182). A question which we would like to pose at this point is whether having the students use a dictionary in the privacy of their homes is, indeed, the best policy in this respect.

7. As in the case of other studies (Barnhard 1962; Béjoint 1981; Marelo 1989, to name a few), the percentage for meaning as the most frequently consulted information category (Question 13) is significantly high, but does it mean that the students have no difficulties with understanding the metalanguage of the definition? (Probably not, which in turn calls for the employment of more precise investigative techniques on the one hand, and specific in-class instruction on the other.) At any rate, more effort may be needed to show future language teachers that this is a very dynamic environment, in which one must be constantly watching for developments (such as the full-sentence definitions employed by *Cobuild*), which may greatly facilitate consultation.
8. To look up a grammar point (Question 13) does not seem to be very frequent (SK 30 %, PL 22 %). It is worth noting that our results are very similar to those obtained by Tomaszczyk (1979), where only 23 out of 69 (33.3%) students claimed they used the grammatical information provided in a monolingual dictionary for the purpose of encoding in L2. Writing teachers in particular need to consider whether this low interest in the information category in question means that our students need no guidance on grammar or, rather, as in Bareggi (1989), that they are unable to retrieve this information from the dictionary. Another interesting question that arises (partly supported by the respondents' strong preoccupation with meaning) is the students' interest, and hence the awareness, of the dictionary as a source of information on closed-class categories (e.g. articles or conjunctions), which, according to studies such as Marelo (1989), may also be insufficient. As regards the use of part of speech labels in decoding, forgetting that some headwords can have more than one part of speech may be one of the reasons for the respondents' inability to find the information searched for (Question 15), which brings us back to the problem noticed in connection with Question 9, awareness of the user's guide and a (frequent) decision to manage without it.
9. A significant number of students use the dictionary while working on a translation exercise (Question 13), which should be taken as an opportunity to show them that a search for 'primary information' (i.e. an unknown translation) in a bilingual dictionary must often be followed by a search for 'secondary information' (e.g. grammar or collocation), which brings into play both monolingual dictionaries as well as specialised dictionaries (e.g. a dictionary of collocations). On the other hand, studies such as Atkins and Varantola (1997) show advanced learners do have this ability, which may also be the case with the two populations surveyed.
10. Generally speaking, the results obtained for Question 13, correspond with those produced by Tomaszczyk (1979), in which activities in the written medium (reading and writing) came before activities in the spoken medium. At any rate, we are in agreement with Cowie (1999:185) who observes that the ranking may be highly specific, 'reflecting [...] the differences of emphasis laid on this activity in particular study programmes'.
11. Look it up in a dictionary or guess the meaning? (Question 12) We repeat after Scholfield (1999:31) that "even if it were shown that guessing alone led to better retention than dictionary use, the latter would still have the advantage that what is being retained is likely to be more accurate".
12. Comparing the results obtained for questions 14-17 with *Slovak and Polish teachers' perceptions* of the subjects' ability to use the dictionary might shed more light on the issue of whether the feeling of satisfaction on the part of the students is, indeed, justified. Answering this question in the negative will, ultimately, result in other questions such as: 'How effective were *we* in teaching dictionary skills to our students?' and "[h]ow effectively [are] EFL teachers [in general] trained to teach dictionary use?" (Cowie 1999:190) Leaving the question unanswered for a while, we note with satisfaction that

students notice that not all of the difficulties encountered are due to inadequate skills on their part; some may result from deficiencies in the dictionaries themselves.

13. As mentioned in passing above, one of the most important differences observed regards instruction in dictionary use (Question 20). The Polish subjects did receive this kind of instruction within a practically-oriented course in lexicography; the fact that 24 per cent of them consider it insufficient implies that user education “should spread over the whole period of language teaching” (Béjoint 1989: 211). The importance they attach to being taught dictionary use (Question 21) may be seen in the response to this question, especially when the results are compared with those obtained by Osuchowska, where the opinion that dictionary use “does not have to be taught – everyone knows how to use a dictionary” (2007: 290) was expressed by subjects who received no such training.

5. Conclusions

Acting on the premise that “some teaching of dictionary use indeed improves the reference skills of the students” (Béjoint 1989: 212, drawing on Griffin 1985, Heath and Herbst 1986, Tono 1984), we tried to identify a number of areas in which improvement may be necessary for our respondents to become more effective dictionary users. Based on the results obtained as well as research carried out by others, we are now in a position to formulate a few requirements concerning the issue under discussion:

- On the one hand, there is continuing effort on the part of dictionary compilers to make the dictionary more user-friendly. At the same time, it is unlikely that the dictionaries put at our disposal will become less complex. This implies that more effort is needed on “improving the user” (Atkins and Varantola 1997: 1), however rocky the route.
- Consequently, explicit attention to the teaching of reference skills is needed in the curricula for foreign language learning, including those designed for higher education institutions. A distinction between being able to use a particular dictionary, being able to use dictionaries in general and being able to use the information supplied by dictionaries for one’s own purposes (Whitcut 1986: 121) may help establish specific objectives holding for one’s highly-specific teaching context. Individual classroom practitioners are encouraged to consider the implications of this general objective for their own in-class policy on dictionary use.
- As argued on several occasions, the overall objective of the pedagogy of dictionary use is to facilitate intelligent use, remembering, at the same time, that “dictionary use is not an end in itself; it is only a means that can be used to improve one’s mastery of the language (or one’s culture in general).” (Béjoint 1989: 209) Hence, the “true objective [...] is to help the students help themselves” (ibid.) and, in the case of teacher trainees, help their own students in the future.
- Hand in hand with the intelligent use of dictionaries goes their efficient use. This implies an ability to obtain the expected results, on the one hand, and accomplishing this in the shortest period of time possible, on the other. As Roberts (1997: 1) pointed out, “[i]n order to be able to use dictionaries efficiently, one has to be aware of (a) the various categories of information that can be found in dictionaries; (b) the overall ordering of these categories; (c) dictionary types; and (d) the specific categories of information found in different dictionary types”. Learning efficient use of dictionaries may have a decisive motivational effect on the rather reluctant learners who have experienced difficulties when consulting dictionaries.
- The mastery of reference skills at all levels should build on dictionary knowledge acquired previously, including knowledge acquired in the context of native language teaching. Lower level teachers (this is particularly true for primary school teachers) might as well start by determining the moment at which the dictionary first appears on the L1 curriculum and act

- on that. Let us note that the literature abounds in the rather vague “when they reach the stage of dictionary consultation” (Béjoint 1989: 210), which has inspired sarcastic remarks such as Beattie’s (1973: 162) “at some point between beginning a foreign language and (say) taking a University degree in it”. Methodology course books are not helpful either, not to mention the fact that some (e.g. Brown 2007: 436) discourage the use of *bilingual dictionaries* in support of vocabulary teaching, which implies that the earliest point at which a dictionary could be introduced (if at all) is when students become advanced learners.
- As there is little explicit training in dictionary-making or dictionary use, an introduction to lexicographic theory and practice may form part of more general courses, for example in English lexicology. At the same time, we must not forget that this education should be practical, a point stressed by, among others, Béjoint (1989: 211) and, in the Polish context, Piotrowski (1994: 80).
 - Instruction in dictionary use must be supported with materials created especially for this purpose, with activities “geared to particular groups of users, following an analysis of their needs and of their skills” (Béjoint 1989: 211). We are unaware of the existence of such materials for the language pairs in question. We also want to stress the fact that the majority of exercises currently included in student course books, the dictionaries themselves and brochures accompanying the dictionaries, are dictionary- rather than language-oriented and that they typically overlook the works’ weaknesses, “thus failing to educate the users on that important point.” (Béjoint 1989: 212)

Notes:

- 1 See Hartmann (2001: 90-91; 172; 178).
- 2 Though Passarotto’s students are Argentinian, the situation she describes bears a close resemblance to our settings.
- 3 The authors are fully aware of the limitations of the investigative technique used.

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