

## FRIEND OR FOE? THE EFFECTS OF MINI-DICTIONARIES ON STUDENT LEARNING

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**Abstract.** *This paper aims to analyse learners' perceptions on the usefulness of the mini-dictionaries and accompanying materials that have been developed to serve as an adjunct to the Beyond the Boundaries course books, with the aim of receiving feedback on how these are beneficial to the students' vocabulary acquisition and development. The analysis of the research findings will lead to the reevaluation of the work conducted and the way that future resources may be developed.*

**Key words:** *key word 1, key word 2, key word 3, key word 4*

### 1. BACKGROUND: FORMATION OF THE VOCABULARY COMPANIONS

The vocabulary syllabus for Sabancı University's School of Languages English preparatory program has been formulated along conventional lines: the General Service List (GSL), comprising the most commonly used two thousand words in the English language, and the University Word List (UWL), which shows the words most frequently occurring in academic materials, combined to create a syllabus of approximately 3,000 headwords to be presented over the course of one academic year within the preparatory program. Students entering the program follow a course of academic English using the school's own coursebook series, *Beyond the Boundaries: English in an Academic Environment*; for each unit of each level of study a mini-dictionary, known as the vocabulary companion, has been compiled. Schmitt (1998:143), Richards (2001:5) and Nation and Newton (in Coady & Huckin (1997:239)) consider a figure approximate to this to be the one that offers a sound foundation in the language, enabling learners to grasp written texts adequately. Richards (2001:5) also notes the consideration of time constraints within a given context when considering the appropriate number of words to be presented, pertinent when the time frame of the program is considered.

The process of creating these mini-dictionaries drew upon freely available internet-based corpus analysis materials to analyse the contents of the books to choose appropriate items from the GSL and UWL to be presented and learnt for each particular unit. Additional worksheets were also produced to allow students to progress from the point of first encountering these words to the stage where they are able to use them productively in their writing and in discussion. The companions and worksheets are used either in class and/or for self-study, also forming the basis for assessment.

The use of dictionaries in the language classroom - and as a resource for learners' autonomous study - is well documented (Corrius & Pujol, 2010:135), with Wright (1998:3) noting, '*dictionaries, whether bilingual or monolingual, have long been part of the language learner's essential equipment*'. Consequently, the formation of a dictionary-type document to

accompany the course book seemed pertinent. Furthermore, the use of corpora in the formation of dictionaries is thoroughly documented in literature, McCarthy noting how a corpus, a collection of written or spoken texts (usually stored on a computer database), can be a very helpful tool in developing resources, *'the types of information we need to create good language teaching materials... and information which can help us understand how learners develop, can be greatly enhanced by the use of a computerized corpus'* (McCarthy, 2004:2). In this instance, the corpus was one of approximately 250,000 words, comprised of the contents of the aforementioned course books.

Lowes and Target (1998:37) suggest that there are several steps that need to be taken to be able to ensure that students can develop autonomous learning habits for their vocabulary acquisition; 1) students should be introduced to a variety of methods and activities for vocabulary learning; 2) they need to think about what is meant by learning a word; and 3) they need to be helped to understand how vocabulary is learned, remembered and recalled for appropriate use. It was felt that developing a dictionary and making it available to students would not in itself fulfill these steps, and so further activities and resources were developed.

## 2. DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected via group interviews. Each group consisted of five students, and the groups covered the range of language ability, from basic and intermediate, including groups having to repeat the basic and intermediate levels. Firstly, students were asked to individually complete an initial questionnaire with regard to their vocabulary study habits. The purpose of these questions was to gain a general impression of the vocabulary study habits of the students, and to see if these differed according to language level. After the students had completed the initial questionnaire, they were invited to a group interview at which more questions were given, around which a discussion would be based. These interviews were recorded and the following observations have been made based on the answers given.

## 3. ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

The first question asked students about their vocabulary study habits. Firstly, students were questioned as to whether they studied vocabulary in class with their teacher's help. Reassuringly, and unsurprisingly, almost all (96%) respondents said that they did this. The next question asked the respondents if they used a vocabulary notebook. Approximately two-thirds (68%) stated that they did; this two-thirds representation being consistent across levels. The students were then asked if they used the vocabulary companion in their studies: all students replied that they did use this resource. The final question in this section of the questionnaire asked if the respondents used the other vocabulary materials available. Almost three-quarters (72%) intimated that they used these resources, although there seemed to be greater prevalence at the intermediate levels than for the basic level respondents. The students were also asked if they regularly employed any other techniques: three students noted that they make translations of word lists into their L1; one mentioned the use of a card file system; one student noted using their laptop, although did not specify how this was used. These alternative techniques were all from the basic level respondents; the other levels made no other comments.

The next question addressed the issue of where the students felt they best learned vocabulary and how often they studied vocabulary per week. The slight majority of

students (56%) felt that learning vocabulary in class was more productive than studying independently, at home (44%). With regard to how often the students studied independently, more than half (60%) stated that they studied vocabulary at home once or twice a week, with the other respondents (40%) stating that they studied independently three or four times weekly. No students, however, claimed to study vocabulary at home every day.

The third question asked the respondents if they were familiar with the supplementary worksheets that accompany the companions and, if so, where they had obtained these from. A large majority (80%) stated that they were familiar with all of the resources, the other 20% recognizing at least some of the materials. No students claimed to be completely unfamiliar with these resources. With regard to the source of the materials, two-thirds (66%) said that their teachers had provided them with the worksheets (either as photocopied handouts or via email), a small number (4%) claimed to have taken these solely from the WebCT facility, with the remaining quarter (24%) taking these materials both from their teachers and from WebCT.

The next question asked students where they had used these documents. While none of the students used these solely as self study materials at home, more than half of the respondents (62%) indicated using them both in class and at home. The remaining 38% only used these work sheets in class.

The final question on the pre-interview questionnaire required the students to give a basic qualitative assessment of the resources. A majority of students (56%) stated that they liked all of the available materials, the remaining 44% stating that they at least liked some of them. Encouragingly, no respondents suggested that they disliked all of the available resources.

By providing students with quantitative, tick the box-type questions on an individual basis, it was hoped that the students would be able to answer easily whilst also be encouraged to consider the materials carefully prior to being interviewed. It was also hoped that these questions would allow for some general patterns to emerge, to which qualitative, meaningful details would be added during the group discussions.

#### 4. DISCUSSION

The data indicates that, regardless of the level, students are almost fully aware of the explicit vocabulary instruction that takes place within the classroom. When it goes beyond teacher-led vocabulary work, the statistics remain encouraging: almost three quarters of learners employ an organized technique for recording new vocabulary (a notebook) and a similar figure exploit the supplementary self-access materials made available to them. With these figures in mind, further research may focus on the reasons that certain learners are not: a) using a formal method for recording new vocabulary, or: b) certain learners are not exploiting all of the vocabulary materials being made available to them, with particular focus on those at lower levels of language ability.

An interesting contrast is evident in terms of the amount of independent study being carried out and the number of learners who were undertaking the independent study outside of the class. While the statistics indicated that there was virtually a level split between those learners who think that classroom study is more beneficial than independent study, there was no indication as to how much independent study was beneficial. Further research may focus on the amount of autonomous learning that learners feel is necessary to make this practice as useful as time spent in class actively learning vocabulary.

The provision of supplementary materials is another key issue, in particular the channels of distribution through which learners may access these. While the data suggests that learners

are highly aware of how to supplement their studies as and when they wish to do so, further research may focus on the effects, positive or negative, of providing further channels of distribution, or even the action of teacher merely increasing awareness of the existence of materials through active promotion (mentioning in class, emails, etc). Another point of interest is where these materials were being used. It appears that some teachers are utilizing them in class, while others are not. The analysis of effectiveness based on this action might lead to some interesting findings from a curriculum development perspective, especially given that more learners place importance on studying vocabulary in class than to independent study.

As a final point of discussion, the popularity of the supplementary materials is not in questions: the materials are universally seen as a positive resource. Nevertheless, further research may focus on those materials that were seen as particularly useful; further materials development may therefore focus on creating more materials in this way.

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