

EFL Learners and EFL Dictionaries are Meant for Each Other

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The English dictionary for foreign learners (EFL dictionary) emerged when two sister disciplines – pedagogical lexicography and English language teaching, joined hands. As it is a reference book or digital platform, many dictionary conventions might not be transparent or self-explanatory enough for average learners to use them effectively. As a result, many learners are unaware of how such dictionaries can support their learning. Also, according to research (Béjoint, 2010), developments in EFL teaching methodologies, have seen the role of the dictionary diminishing in the English teaching classroom.

I'm an EAP/ESP teacher at HKUST for over 30 years and my research interest is in EFL dictionary use training of the Big Six EFL dictionariesⁱ for both teachers and students. In my work, I often emphasize that partnership with the English teacher is critical in sensitising students to use dictionaries as a resource for learning (Chi, 2022). So, I hope the following illustrations of how to use dictionaries to support vocabulary learning will ignite your interest in playing the role of a matchmaker of this 'EFL-destined pair'.

What are EFL Dictionaries?

A.S. Hornby compiled the first EFL dictionary in 1942ⁱⁱ to meet the specific learning needs of EFL learners, such as collocation and grammar. The compilation was supported by discussions and findings from research in pedagogical grammar and vocabulary acquisition during the Vocabulary Control Movement in the 1920s-30s (Cowie, 1999). When the EFL dictionary was first conceptualised and compiled in the 1930s, the dictionary was supposed to have been an integral part of English lessons with teachers helping students to use the dictionary to learn, if necessary (Chi, 2020). Compared to print EFL dictionaries, digital versions (App and free-access online versions), offer more diverse and in-depth linguistic information and illustrative examples, and study links.

Are EFL Dictionaries Just for Weak Learners?

Most students would benefit from using EFL dictionaries. Swan (2010) maintains that since the EFL teaching focus has been on communicative competence, the importance of teaching the

actual language aspects, like phonology, lexis and grammar, which are needed in actual performance are often overlooked. As a result, students are often found lacking the linguistic knowhow to use, or are unskilled in using, English reference books in the learning process.

Students use Google for Word Search, and they are Doing Alright. Are they?

While it is true that such online platforms can provide vast and in-depth lexical information, the quality and applicability of search outcomes presented by students as shown in their work are not always desirable, depending often on students' understanding of the errors, their level of computing knowhow and language aspects such as phonology, lexis and grammar. This is particularly worrying with weaker students. Also, deciphering a vast amount of unstructured data offered by the search engine is demanding of one's cognitive ability and language proficiency, not to mention time and patience (Lew, 2011).

The following are some useful features of digital EFL dictionaries for EAP students to scaffold their learning of English vocabulary.

(1) Comprehensible definitions

Learners' gain:	To acquire English new words through reading comprehensible English definitions, thus maximising L2 input in the learning process
How?	Through reading English definitions in EFL dictionaries
How is this possible?	All EFL dictionaries use a convention referred to as Defining Vocabulary (Oxford University Press, n.d.; Prefectural University of Kumamoto, n.d.; Macmillan Education Limited, 2009) ⁱⁱⁱ to write definitions for word entries. Since the size of the Defining Vocabulary is small (e.g. <i>Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English</i> uses 2,000 words), and all the words belong to core English vocabulary, definitions are relatively easy to understand. Such a convention distinguishes EFL dictionaries from general English dictionaries like <i>Merriam-Webster</i> or <i>Microsoft Encarta Dictionary</i> , which target native or native-like speakers of English. Compare the words used in the definitions of the word 'turgid' in the following two dictionary entries to see the difference:

turgid

From Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English

Related topics: [Literature](#)

tur-gid /'tʌ:dʒɪd \$ 'tɜ:r-/ **adjective formal**

1 turgid writing or speech is boring and difficult to understand **SYN** dull
 a turgid Social Science textbook

2 full and swollen with liquid or air

—**turgidity** /tɜ:'dʒɪdɪti \$ tɜ:r-/ **noun [uncountable]**

turgid adjective

Save Word

tur-gid | \ 'tɜː-jəd ㄊㄨˋ

Definition of turgid

1 : excessively embellished in style or language : BOMBASTIC, POMPOUS
// turgid prose

2 : being in a state of distension : SWOLLEN, TUMID
// turgid limbs
especially : exhibiting turgor

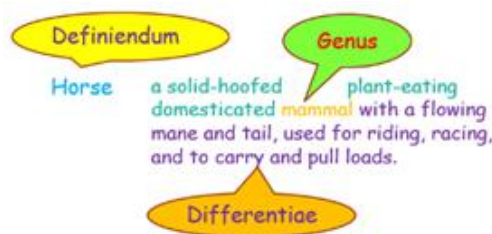


How can EAP teachers facilitate such learning?

- 1) Point out explicitly in class to EFL learners the inadequacies in learning new English words through a quick search for their L1 translation equivalents, particularly if the words are for speaking or writing tasks.
- 2) Use online dictionaries in class whenever possible and read through the definitions with the students to assure them of the ease of understanding.
- 3) Encourage weaker students to use EFL dictionary’s Defining Vocabulary lists as learning targets to gradually boost their vocabulary competence, and thus, eventually help them use such dictionaries to support learning.

(2) Analytical definition writing convention facilitates vocabulary scaffolding

Learners’ gain:	To understand the hierarchical word relation of the English lexicon and thus facilitate mapping of words in vocabulary learning
How?	Through reading English definitions written in analytical phrases
How is this possible?	A common type of dictionary definition consists of an analytical phrase based on the classical schema of ‘genus’ and ‘differentiae’. For example, the definition of the word ‘horse’ includes all common characteristics the animal has as a domesticated mammal, and the unique characteristics a horse has which distinguish it from similar animals under the same class.



This definition style shows a hyponym-hypernym word relation, which is a hierarchical relation of inclusion of a subtype (hyponym) and a supertype (hypernym). For example:

Stationery paper pen ink	(hypernym/superordinate word) (hyponyms)
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How can EAP teachers facilitate such learning?

- 1) Explain explicitly the hierarchical hyponym-hypernym word relation to students to raise their awareness of such a word relationship when looking up word meanings. Clarify to students that hypernyms are words with a broad range of meanings which they would have learned at elementary or intermediate level; for example, the word 'shelter'. At tertiary level, nevertheless, we expect them to demonstrate their ability in using more precise and accurate vocabulary, which often utilize hyponyms with a narrow range of applications, in tasks. For example, more precise words like 'dugout' (Cambridge University Press, n.d.)^{iv} and 'bunker' (Cambridge University Press, n.d.) are preferred options rather than 'shelter' if the context requires precision in word choice.
- 2) Encourage weaker students to apply this defining structure to seek unknown (hyponym) words using known (hypernym) – a vocabulary learning strategy which may encourage students to avoid using translation equivalents when they seek a more specific word to solve a linguistic task. For examples,



How do you call the hole that in a war soldiers will dig to hide or to fire at the enemy?

foxhole



What word should I use to refer to the small amount of money we have prepared as a token of thanks to the professor for giving a talk to our students?

honorarium

(3) Topic-based wordlists for quick reference

Learners' gain: To be able to use a range of, or specific, words to express ideas in writing and speaking




How? Use wordlists the dictionary provides to enrich vocabulary production in writing and speaking or for setting vocabulary learning targets

How is this possible? Online EFL dictionaries have the space, quick cross-referencing links and attractive graphics to provide lexical information. For example,




Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD)


- a) OALD cross-references its headwords semantically if they are related to those under the dictionary's wordlists labelled as **TOPICS**. OALD offers 18 **TOPICS** (Oxford University Press, n.d.)^v, and users can access more detailed wordlists classified under different **subject areas** given in every topic, and each area is further branched out to **specific wordlists** with plenty of CEFR-C2 level words. For example, under the **TOPIC** 'politics and society':


TOPIC: politics and society	Under the subject area 'Crime and punishment'	The specific wordlist under 'Committing crime'
7 subject areas: Crime and punishment Law and justice People and society Politics Religion and festivals Social Issues War and conflict	7 specific word lists: committing crime Criminals Prison Punishment Solving crime Types of crime	Words and their CEFR level: C2 70 C1 29 B2 12 B1 11 A2 4 A total of 126 words



b) OALD offers Oxford 3000 (Oxford University Press, n.d.)^{vi}, symbolised by a key and CEFR level like this  as vocabulary learning references for dictionary users. In addition, OALD has combined several wordlists and created the *Oxford Phrasal Academic Lexicon* (OPAL) specially for the study of English for Academic Purposes. OPAL includes spoken and written phrases, as well as words, core to students at a high level of study and they are labelled in the dictionary entries with symbols like   (see the sample entry 'solution' from OALD below):

solution *noun*

 /səˈluːʃn/

 /səˈluːʃn/

1   [countable] a way of solving a problem or dealing with a difficult situation

SYNONYM [answer](#)

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (LDOCE)

a) LDOCE contains similar topic pages for users to search words based on themes (Pearson, n.d.).^{vii} For example, under the topic 'crime and law, the following word entries are provided:

Topic: Crime & law

Explore Crime & law Topic

prisoner gas chamber condemned KC stalker alarmed impeach racket allegation hanging transportation shop
 detain life contraband licensed compensation dick condemned cell fed Federal Bureau of Investigation bail debug
 racketeering breath test relieve report gallows ransom gibbet lynch penology line-up complicity amnesty
 posse transport circumstantial racketeer enforce

[Show all entries from Topic: Crime & law](#)

- b) LDOCE also offers vocabulary learning references for dictionary users. For example, the dictionary labels words which belong to the first 3000 core vocabulary in speaking and writing with symbols like **S1** **W1**, and label **AWL** to indicate Coxhead's AWL words. For example, the sample entry 'area' from LDOCE below:



How can EAP teachers facilitate such learning?

- 1) Suggest students use the dictionary wordlists to formulate vocabulary learning targets.
- 2) Direct students to the dictionary topic pages to look for precise vocabulary for writing or speaking tasks.

Modern EFL dictionaries contain abundant linguistic information as reference for EAP students. To exploit such vast resources, students need to be aware of their existence, appreciate the value of such dictionaries in vocabulary learning, and be equipped with the necessary vocabulary learning knowledge and strategies to fully understand and utilise them. If you are interested in knowing more about EFL dictionaries, you may find the following two suggestions useful.

- a) Watch videos^{viii} which target a lay audience to learn more about EFL dictionaries. For example:



<https://www.asialex.org/img/asiale>

<https://www.asialex.org/img/asiale>

- b) Attend a free MOOC course to understand English dictionaries^{ix}
<https://www.macmillandictionary.com/learn/dictionary-mooc.html>

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ⁱ *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary; Collins COBUILD Advanced Dictionary; Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English; Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners; Merriam-Webster Learner's Dictionary; Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary.*

ⁱⁱ *The Idiomatic and Syntactic English Dictionary* (Hornby, Gatenby & Wakefield, 1942), renamed as *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1948) and currently known as *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, marked the beginning of this new genre of dictionaries with focuses on English grammar and phraseology.

ⁱⁱⁱ Defining Vocabulary of dictionaries can be accessed from their own online platforms. For example:

Oxford 3000: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/wordlists/oxford3000-5000>

Longman 2000: https://www.pu-kumamoto.ac.jp/users_site/rlavin/resources/wordlists/LDV.html

Macmillan 2500 <https://www.macmillandictionary.com/learn/clear-definitions/>

^{iv} <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/dugout>

<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/bunker>

^v <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/topic/>

^{vi} <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/about/wordlists/oxford3000-5000>

^{vii} <https://www.ldoceonline.com/browse/topics.html>

^{viii} *LexTeach* is a project of the **Asian Association for Lexicography** (The Asian Association for Lexicography, n.d. <https://www.asialex.org>) to promote lexicography to the public through disseminating dictionary knowledge essential for users to understand how English dictionaries could support their learning and/or teaching of the English language. The videos here were two lectures delivered via zoom to a lay audience organised by *LexTeach* 2022.

^{ix} *Understanding English Dictionaries* is a MOOC produced through a collaboration between experts at Coventry University (Hilary Nesi and Sharon Creese), The Alan Turing Institute (Barbara McGillivray), and Macmillan Education (Katalin Süle and Michael Rundell). The six-week course is hosted on

the [FutureLearn](#) platform, and is free to join (information extracted from <https://lexicala.com/review/2020/rundell-understanding-dictionaries/>).