

Amended version
of article

DICTIONARIES AND OPINIONS
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In this article I want to outline four simple dictionary exercises that allow students to make dictionary text their own and in so doing discover something of the nature of this book genre.

In the autumn of 1993 I had a formidable Korean woman in my class - she was one of the Korean Labour Movement's top translators and interpreters (Korean-German). Her wish in my class was to bring her English up to the level of her German. As I thought about her maternal needs in the group (she was in her mid thirties and most of the others were in their early twenties) I dreamt up this exercise:

Choosing gifts from a dictionary

I asked the interpreter to think of someone she wanted to help in the group and, with this in mind, take the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture and choose three items from it she wanted to teach her classmate. (The items could be words, historical entries, items to do with her country or the classmate's country, items to do with the classmate's fields of interest etc.....)

The exercise worked well but it only happened once as the Korean student then went on to invent the second exercise I want to present to you:

The dictionary as a bedside book

She simply hung onto my dictionary and I did not see it again for six weeks. When she gave it back she told me it had been an invaluable source of cultural background - she had read it letter by letter from cover to cover. It had given her a picture of what the British in the late eighties deemed to be normal "knowledge baggage" about the world and their place in it.

It is whispered that Aldous Huxley, as a boy, read a large encyclopaedia from A to Z. Maybe you have the odd student who might at least like to read the entries under one letter and so get a real feel of the odd world this small group of lexicographers live in.

When you read Kafka you enter into a subjective world of one man's imagination. And roughly the same is true of the Longman Dictionary of English Language and Culture: here you enter into the subjective world of a small group of language intellectuals living in the late eighties on a sinking, West European off-shore island

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As the lexicographers work from their corpora they would maybe claim that they are striving for objectivity (a strange term invented by some bizarre ancient Greek - for how can any thought process claim this impossible quality?). What they are actually doing is imposing their own understanding and world view on the bits of the huge river of language that they describe in the few pages at their disposal (around 1500). What makes this attempt tragic and humorous is that they are striving hard to avoid just such an imposition.

and interpreting the islanders'
^ ^ ^ view of the reality
round them as found
in the corpora the dictionary is ^{obsessed} _{own}

The politics of dictionaries

Did you know that the Thai Government for a time banned this dictionary from its territory because the entry on Bangkok mentioned the prevalence of prostitution there? The fact that the dictionary is full of marvellous, uncoordinated subjectivity makes it an ideal hunting ground for students interested in UK attitudes and culture. Last summer, while teaching at the Cambridge Academy, I asked my students to search for definitions they did not agree with.

The “~~bad~~” definitions exercise

A woman from Spain unearthed these two entries that she felt it was instructive for us to read together:

Benidorm: a town on the Spanish Mediterranean coast visited by tourists from many European countries and popular with British people as a place to go on a package holiday.

Madrid: the capital city of Spain, in the centre of the country.

The other Spanish people in the class were keen to discuss the British view of their country as a sort of second-home suburb of London, Birmingham and Manchester. The idea of tourism from the North of Europe to the South as a modification of the North’s normal imperialism etc...

On that three week course the Longman lexicographers offered me a series of lively lessons I did not have to prepare for at all: half hour periods of guaranteed discussion of UK prejudice.

At this point you may well be itching to go and look up some pet things of yours in the dictionary in question. If you don’t have a copy handy let me show you another entry, preceded by some language background.

Saint Malo in France was the home of some sailors who took over a group of rocky islands in the South Atlantic. They called them the “Malouines”. The Spanish corruption of their word is “Malvinas” and the UN designation for these islands is “Malvinas-Falklands”. The lexicographers have ignored the internationally accepted name for these disputed lands and you will only find them mentioned under the second part of their UN name: “Falklands”. The entry reads thus:

“a group of islands in the South West Atlantic ocean, near Argentina, under British control. Known as the Malvinas in Argentina.”

The entry under “Falklands War” is an even more interesting reading in terms of British attitudes and culture you’ll have to borrow, nick or purchase a copy of the dictionary in question!

For my fourth dictionary exercise I used the Longman Language Activator:

Choose a head word

I asked one of the students for homework to choose one of the head words in the dictionary and come to class prepared to explain not more than six of the words or phrases connected with it. The first student to do the exercise chose TO FORGET and then these connected phrases to teach us:

to slip your mind
it escapes me
can't place
go in one ear and out the other
scatterbrained
to have a memory like a sieve

At first I thought this was a banal enough mini-presentation exercise (these were business people who needed to practise presentation skills). But what I realised as person after person took the dictionary hot-seat was that the choice of head word was very personally significant. The student who chose TO FORGET was very worried about how new English words went in one ear and out the other. The student who chose TO HELP was expressing loads about himself in his role as an administrator in Salamanca and so on. By week 3 of the course we were all wondering what word the "dictionary person" for the day would come up with.

Do you know of any psychologically neutral or "innocent" exercise?

Your students are waiting to help you invent new exercises around dictionary use just as mine have helped me. Why not send them to the EFL News to fire other readers.

PS: At the end of the course alluded to above some of the students sent letters to Della Summers, the head dictionary editor at Longman, about their responses to the Culture and Activator volumes.

It is good to give screen-bound people feedback on their work and good to give students the chance to write real letters in English to real people, people who have made a lifework of informing, misleading and helping learners.

to understand the thinking of an odd, island people.

the Longman Lexicographic Team

They received full and interesting answers.