

ABSTRACT

My work as a teacher of English in the pre-university stages has led me to find ways to improve my teaching practice. The resources that learners have at hand are not always fully exploited, mainly due to their lack of knowledge. One of these resources is the bilingual learners' dictionary, a rich source of material which, if sensibly used, can be a great help to our students. Previous studies on the use of the bilingual dictionary for different tasks carried out by secondary students have shown that, unfortunately, this is not always the case. Particularly striking is in the students' written work. We have noticed that when students write their compositions, they all use their dictionaries, but they do not make the most out of them, there is a large amount of information that is ignored.

Starting from this assumption, we believe that if students are systematically trained in the use of the dictionary, they will benefit of the help that it can provide, specifically as to the learning and expansion of vocabulary, the help with their written production, and their overall L2 language competence. Also, the progressive use of the dictionary in the learning tasks will contribute to make them more and more autonomous learners.

To test this hypothesis, we have conducted a case study with Secondary Education Spanish students who are learning English as a foreign language, within the natural environment where real tuition takes place, and who have received systematic training along the whole academic year.

The study consists of two stages: In the first one, through the use of questionnaires and tests, we carried out a reference needs and a reference skills analysis, with students from 3rd and 4th year of Secondary Education, in order to check, on the one hand, what type of dictionaries our students use and what for; and on the other hand, their abilities when confronted with tasks requiring its use. This first step was followed by a series of worksheets to train students in different and varied aspects of dictionary use. This first stage yielded some results that confirmed our assumption:

1. Students make very little use of dictionaries and when they do, they look mainly for translations. They ignore any further information, and so they rarely use it.

2. At the end of the year, students had gained confidence in the use of the dictionary and had improved their performance.

The second stage focuses on the effect of the use of the bilingual dictionary for the students' written work, both for the elaboration and the subsequent revision and correction process. We concentrated on three main areas, the crucial skills for the encoding needs of the learners:

- a. Using the contextual information to make the appropriate lexical choices.
- b. Using the grammatical and syntactic information that will help them to use words correctly.
- c. Identifying and using the lexical combinations of the English language.

During the whole academic year, students were assigned regular written work that had to be revised and corrected using the bilingual dictionary. In addition, worksheets including the areas mentioned above, with activities based on the errors of the students' compositions, and contents included in the course syllabus were prepared and completed in class every term. Observation of the process proved to be another valuable method of data collecting.

The results confirm that students do not use their dictionaries properly for their writing tasks because they don't understand most of the information provided. Regular training and frequent access to the works of reference is vital if we want to make our students skilful users as a means to enhance their competence in L2, and the earlier we start the better.

One of the main conclusions drawn from the experimental part of the research is the need to integrate this essential resource in the learning of a foreign language, in the real teaching situation, as the best way to turn the practice into a good habit. Incorporating the dictionary in the teaching materials is one way to highlight its importance as a learning tool. Bearing this idea in mind, we analysed the curriculum for the English language and how it is implemented in the textbooks as a previous step to designing a didactic proposal to help develop reference skills and language learning, offering guidance for teachers on how to include it in their daily work.