

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

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Background and Rationale

Dictionaries are one of the most readily available, widely used, and cheapest resources which can help students with their language learning. Dictionaries can help learners with understanding and producing text, as well as vocabulary learning. Many studies (Knight, 1994; Luppescu & Day, 1993) show that students who use dictionaries perform better than those who do not use them.

But many researchers (Berwick & Horsfall, 1996; Nesi, 1999; Wright, 1998) point out that one problem of dictionary users is that they cannot make full use of the information provided by their dictionaries. This is because most learners do not know how to choose the right kind of dictionaries, what kind of information can be found in dictionaries, how to locate the entry information, and how to interpret entry information. Researchers (Berwick & Horsfall, 1996; Nesi, 1999; Wright, 1998) note that the reason for this is that most users do not have adequate and sufficient training for using dictionaries. Summers (1988) also mentions that although the dictionary can put students in charge, teachers often do not train their students in how to use it to the best advantage. Many other researchers (Cater & McCarthy, 1988; Holzman, 2000; Jordan, 1997; Nation, 2001) believe that dictionary skill training is still a neglected area of language teaching which teachers need to put more effort into teaching. Indeed, Wright (1998) points out that the whole idea of dictionary training is relatively new.

Walz (1990) gives several arguments showing why dictionary use should be taught: the dictionary is the essential source of information about words and it can be

a tool for lifelong learning since students will add to their vocabulary throughout their entire lives. Therefore it is worth learning the skill; the dictionary is not a dull, dry reference book and it can be used for more than just practicing safe lex. Thus, Gairns and Redman (1986) suggest that in a learning situation, dictionary training should be an integral part of any syllabus because efficient dictionary use is a strategy in itself and crucial for self-learning.

In China, it is not common to offer a special training course to guide dictionary use for foreign language learning purposes because most curriculum designers assume that such training has already been offered in the native language learning. Those people ignore the fact that foreign language dictionaries have a great wealth of additional features such as grammatical information and cultural information which the native language dictionary users do not pay attention to. Such habits may influence the way learners use foreign language dictionaries; thus, leading to low efficiency in dictionary consultation. There should be a smooth transfer between the use of a native language dictionary and the use of a foreign language dictionary. Learners need to know the different features, structures, and functions contained in their foreign language dictionaries. Learners should be taught to be familiar with the use of foreign language dictionaries. In this sense, offering a dictionary skill training course for the use of English dictionaries is meaningful and worthwhile.

Nesi (1999) summarizes four major themes that emerge from discussion with his informants when doing his dictionary project: students enter university with poor dictionary skills; there is insufficient dictionary skill training at the university level; some dictionary training tasks are unpopular with staff and students; and the teaching of dictionary skills is believed to be important by both teachers and students.

Although Nesi's project was done in Europe, the issues brought forward by the informants are quite true for the Chinese situation.

The first-year English major students in Chinese universities are facing the challenge of university study, which is quite different from their former learning experience. In China, there is a significant difference between high-school and university study. In high-school, Chinese students tend to consider their teachers as the main source of learning. Students get used to being educated by the 'spoon-feeding' method. But in the university, things are quite different. Students need to adjust themselves because teachers are not going to spoon feed them. Instead, the teachers' role is like a guide. Students need to take responsibility for their own learning. In this sense, dictionary skills training are especially necessary and important for the newly entered university English major students because English is their focus of study in the next four years. Since this group of learners is majored in English, there is a need for them to use dictionaries as a life-long learning tool.

As mentioned before, this group of students does not have adequate training in dictionary use. Some of the students may have such training in their English language classes offered by their language teachers. But due to the time limits, course burden, exam pressure, and the lack of training materials, teachers who realize the importance of teaching dictionary use skills usually do not have enough time and energy to give a systematical training. Thus, the training which learners receive cannot be comprehensive and professional.

Another factor which makes designing and offering the dictionary skill training course necessary and unique is that there are not many available learning sources and materials which can help learners to develop their dictionary use abilities. The most readily available source is dictionary workbooks which claims to help

learners to make the best use of their dictionaries. But compared with the dictionary skill training course, dictionary workbooks have some disadvantages.

First, the dictionary workbooks only focus on training learners to use a certain kind of dictionary. The main dictionary publishers like Longman, Macmillan, and Oxford University Press design workbooks which include a collection of exercises to accompany their dictionaries. But the fact is as Nesi (1999) points out that most dictionary workbooks are designed to support the use of one particular dictionary, rather than encouraging the use of a wide range of reference books. For example, the *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary Workbook* provides advice and exercises to help learners to use some of the original features of the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary*. The *Longman Language Activator Workbook* helps learners to deal with the production dictionary, *Longman Language Activator*, which aims to help learners to write and speak English.

Second, the skills included in dictionary workbooks are not as comprehensive as the skills included in the course. Most dictionary workbooks only cover the basic skills like understanding pronunciation, using grammar information, and finding the meaning. These skills may be suitable for beginners, but not for university students, who have higher requirements such as using a dictionary for comprehension, for production, and for vocabulary learning. For example, *Macmillan English Dictionary Workbook* claims that it helps students to develop basic reference skills by providing exercises that cover all essential aspects of dictionary use. Meanwhile, via an Internet search, this writer has found that all the dictionary workbooks are accompanied by monolingual dictionaries. That means the skills covered in these dictionary workbooks do not include the skills needed for the use of bilingual dictionaries and bilingualised dictionaries. For example, the *Longman Dictionary Skills Handbook* is

designed for an English-English dictionary.

Third, dictionary workbooks are designed for all users of a particular dictionary. There is no certain target group for dictionary workbooks, so the result of training may not be effective. Usually, dictionary workbooks are designed for learners from all non-English speaking countries. There is no special emphasis on the needs for certain groups of learners, which in this case refers to first-year English major students who study at a Chinese university. Different learners come from different language background and have their own habits of learning English, so the dictionary skill training course has the advantage of focusing on different target groups to satisfy different needs.

Moreover, it is hard to buy dictionary workbooks in the Chinese market. The writer cannot find any dictionary workbooks sold in Chengdu, one of the big cities in China. Based on informal interviews with some university teachers and students, most of them do not know dictionary workbooks. For those who know the existence of dictionary workbooks, none of them have ever seen or used them.

All these factors show that designing and offering a dictionary skill training course is now a must and first-line task for teachers. In order to help English major Chinese students to develop their confidence as dictionary users and provide a guideline for teachers, the present project aimed to design a dictionary skill training course to enhance English major Chinese university students' ability to use their dictionaries.

Aims and Objectives

This project aimed to design a dictionary skill training course for the first-year English major students in a Chinese university to equip them with dictionary skills as a life-long learning tool and promote dictionary use as a self-learning tool.

The specific objectives were:

1. To explore strategies of dictionary use, which Chinese university English major students need in order to improve their dictionary use skills
2. To provide guidelines and a general design for teachers to utilize when they want to offer a dictionary skill training course

Benefits

The product of this project may increase English major Chinese students' general knowledge of dictionary resources and dictionary functions. It will help students to improve their ability to choose and use dictionaries. It will also help students to be aware that dictionaries are something which will help them with their language learning throughout their lives. Moreover, it will help to develop learning autonomy and build self-confidence for learners. As a result, learners will be more independent and more learning may take place outside the classroom with the efficient use of the dictionary.

The product of this project can serve as a guideline and blueprint for administrators of any institution as well as for individual teachers who wish to design a similar dictionary skill training course to meet the students' needs and better their study.

The result of the design may help Chinese university curriculum designers to realize the important role which dictionary use plays in a foreign language study. It may activate a greater interest in curriculum revision and improvement.

Steps in the Course Design

In this part, I will discuss issues involved in designing the dictionary skill training course. It includes my considerations and choices in designing the course.

Needs Analysis

Needs analysis is considered as the initial stage for designing a course. It is necessary and important because it can provide valuable information to help course development, classroom preparation, curriculum planning and implementation of the teaching methods.

The target group in the dictionary skill training course is first-year English major students in a Chinese university. It is easy to identify general information like students' age, educational background, and learning environment. To get more detailed information like user habits, preferences and needs, I depend on the literature survey and informal interviews with the Chinese university teachers and learners.

The literature survey focuses on two areas. One is the former research, the other is the available dictionary skill training materials. By reviewing some dictionary-related literature, I found useful information like skills needed at the university level, learners' dictionary use habit and preferences, and general learning style of Chinese students. This information is useful in helping me to make dictionary

skill content choices and teaching method choices.

The informal interviews involved questions like, “Do you think offering the course is necessary? What skills do you want to learn from the course? How do you use your dictionary?” The answers to these questions provided information about learners’ needs and expectations for the dictionary skill training course.

Design Issues and Options

From the needs analysis, two basic decisions were made for the course. One was the content choices, and the other was the teaching methods choices. They build up the framework for the dictionary skill training course.

The first choice was about the content of the dictionary skill training. It served as the theoretical foundation for the course. Since there are many ways of defining dictionary skills, I chose to follow the ideas of Nesi (1999) and Nation (2001).

Nesi (1999) grouped dictionary use skills which a university level students might need in order to use dictionaries effectively. These skills are covered in six stages: before study stage, before dictionary consultation stage, locating entry information stage, interpreting entry information stage, recording entry information stage, and understanding lexicographical issues stage. In these stages, the sorts of skills required by language learners when they use dictionaries were exhaustive and clearly specified.

Nation (2001) distinguished between the different requirements and strategies for dictionary use in conjunction with four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. The strategies he proposed as using dictionaries for receptive purposes and using dictionaries for productive purposes gave insights for the course

design and thus set out the basis for learner training.

Second, the idea of learner-centeredness was recommended to underpin the dictionary skill training course. Factors considered for this kind of classroom included things like learners' needs and interests, participation, autonomy, cooperation, learning styles and strategies, and self-evaluation. The nature of a learner-centered class decided the characteristics of the role which the teacher and students play, teaching and learning methods used, and assessment format. For example, the use of self-evaluation, peer evaluation, portfolio and self-reflection reports as ways of assessing learners' performance in the course reflected the idea of self-assessment which is considered as one of the important elements in the learner-centered class.

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