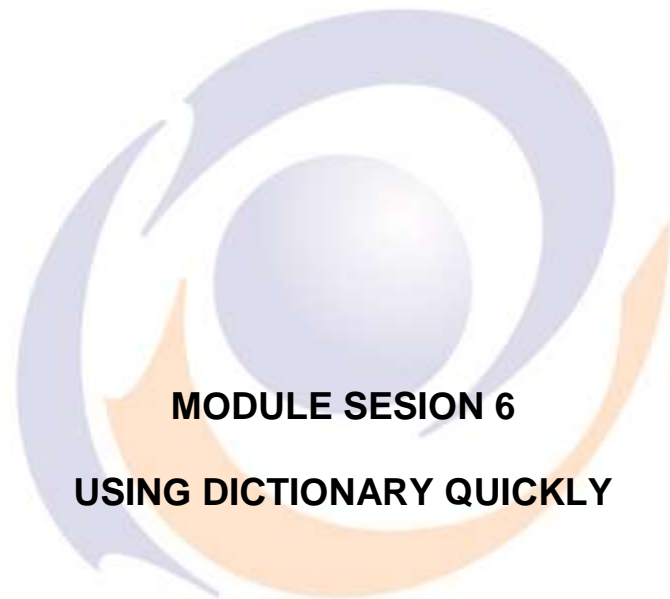




MODULE INTENSIVE READING
(PBI 221)



MODULE SESION 6
USING DICTIONARY QUICKLY

Universitas
Esa Unggul

ARRANGED BY:
MEIYANTI NURCHAERANI.S.S, M.Hum

UNIVERSITAS ESA UNGGUL

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HOW TO USE A DICTIONARY TO LEARN NEW WORDS WHEN READING

We've already found out about different types of English dictionaries and what they are useful for. This time, let's have a look at how to actually use your dictionary.

Dictionaries can be really helpful when you are reading because they help you find out the meaning of words you don't know. However, using a dictionary too much can cause problems with your reading skills. To read comfortably, it's important to be able to guess the meaning of unknown words using the other words around it to help you. We call this guessing from context. This is important because it helps you read faster and gives you the skills you need to read in English when you don't have a dictionary available.

What happens if you are really not sure of the meaning of a word, though? What about if you guess the wrong meaning and start using the word incorrectly? Here's a way to practice reading and guessing from context, then using your dictionary to make sure you are correct.

Step one: Find a text to practice with

Choose something that's a manageable length. A news or magazine article is usually a good length for this. If you want to use a book, just choose a page or two to start with.

Step two: Read it as fast as you can

Read through the article and try to understand the general idea or 'get the gist' of the article. Don't worry about the details at this point; we'll have plenty of time for that later. This is useful because if you read in too much detail to start with, you might

Step three: Read it in more detail

Now you know the structure of the text and a little about the information in it, you are ready to read it in a bit more detail. Read each paragraph and make sure you understand the main point of it. If you are having trouble with a particular word, underline it but don't stop reading – something later in the paragraph might help you understand what it means.

Step four: Look at the tricky words again

Look back at the words you underlined and try to guess what they mean. Now you are familiar with the text, it should be a lot easier and you will find that you can actually guess a lot of them. If you are having trouble, try thinking of other words or expressions you could exchange for the tricky words, they might be synonyms (mean the same).

Step five: Dictionary time!

OK, now it's time to get your dictionary out. Go back over the tricky words and check your guesses were right. If not, make a note of the correct meaning of the words. Make a note of the new words and save them for later.

Step six: Read it again

Now you know what all the words and expressions in the text mean, read it one last time to help you remember the sentences in which you saw the new words. Remembering how the words were used is as important as the meanings themselves, because it will help you to use them correctly in the future.

Remember: you don't need to read like this all the time. It takes a long time and would not be practical in an exam or if you need to read a long book quickly. You can use the same idea in everyday reading, though. Just read it twice rather than four times, and remember – always have a go at guessing the word before you use your dictionary.

How to use a dictionary effectively

Reasons for using a dictionary

A dictionary is a very important tool for anyone who is learning a new language. With a good dictionary you can do the following:

- look up the meaning of an English word you see or hear
- find the English translation of a word in your language
- check the spelling of a word
- check the plural of a noun or past tense of a verb
- find out other grammatical information about a word
- find the synonym or antonym of a word
- look up the collocations of a word
- check the part of speech of a word
- find out how to say a word
- find out about the register of a word
- find examples of the use of a word in natural language

To be a good dictionary user, however, it is not enough to know what to use the dictionary for. You must also decide which is the best dictionary for any of the purposes listed above. As well as this, you need to be able to find what you are

looking for quickly; you need to be sure that you have found what you were looking for; and, most importantly, you need to know when to use your dictionary.

Knowing which dictionary to use

Electronic dictionaries are the best choice for ESL students. Most of them contain native-language equivalents and explanations, as well as definitions and example sentences in English. They can speak the English word to you, and they are easy to carry around. However, they are expensive and easy to lose, so put your name on yours!

A cheaper possibility, if you are going to work at the computer, is to use an online dictionary. A very good one for ESL students is the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English. Alternatively, if you open Google and type, for example, define: superstitious, you will get a long list of different definitions of superstitious.

A good monolingual dictionary is recommended for students who already have a high standard of English and want to learn about word use.

Finding words quickly

This is a skill that you need to practise. Ask someone to write down 5 words and see how long it takes you to find them. Of course, you will need to know the English alphabet perfectly, so practise this too. Use the guide words at the top of each dictionary page; and keep practising until you can find any word within 10 seconds. You should also practise finding words in your own language in your bilingual dictionary. If you use an electronic dictionary, take some time at home to learn how it works and, again, practise finding words quickly.

Finding the right meaning of an English word

Very often when you look up a new English word, you find that it has more than one meaning. If you are not sure which one is correct, here's what you can do:

- First, check through all the meanings and find the one that makes most sense in the context where you found the word. (Very often, many of the different meanings are similar and this should be enough to give you a good idea what the word means.)
- Second, if you really want to make sure, think what the word is in your own language and look it up in a bilingual dictionary. If one of the English translations is the original word you looked up, then you can be satisfied that you have found the right meaning.

Finding the right spelling

Another problem you may have is when you want to check your spelling but you can't find the word you're looking for. What can you do?

- If you are sure of the first few letters, just look down the page until you find the right spelling. (Again, it is helpful to check the meaning is the one you expect.)
- If you are not sure of the first few letters, try some other possibilities. You know for example that some words that start with an -n sound have k as their first letter; e.g. knife, knight. So if you can't find the word under N, try looking in the K pages.
- If you still can't find the word, think what it is in your language and look it up in your bilingual dictionary.

Finding the right English translation of a word in your language

When you look up a word in your own language in a bilingual dictionary, you will probably find that there is more than one English translation. If you are not sure which to use, you could try a back translation. This means that you look up the English translations one by one in a monolingual dictionary. If a word has a definition that matches the word in your language, you are safe to use it.

Knowing when to use the dictionary

If you look up every new word you see or hear, you will spend your whole day with the dictionary in your hand. That's no good! You have to be clever and choose the right words to check and the right time to do it. Try to follow the advice below and you will become a much more efficient language learner:

- When you find a new word while reading, finish the sentence (better: the paragraph). If you haven't guessed the meaning and it still seems important, then you can look it up. To avoid interrupting your reading for too long, you should find its meaning in your own language using a bilingual dictionary.
- When you hear a new word in class (or the teacher has written it on the board), wait and continue listening. What the teacher says next may help you to understand the word. If you look in your dictionary, you will not hear what comes next, and this will make understanding the lesson more and more difficult. If you think the word is very important, you could copy it from the board or write how you think it is spelled. Then later you could ask the teacher or another student what it means.

Enrichment of Vocabulary and Use of the Dictionary

- The dictionary is used when the context does not permit extracting the meaning. So it is very important to insist that students get used to infer from context the meaning of the vocabulary as much as possible. They should be advised to resort to the dictionary, but only in cases where it is really necessary (Fernández de Bobadilla, 1999).
- The acquisition of scientific terms is achieved through the study of the subject area itself. Introductory texts as well as dictionaries of technical terms can provide definitions when the context is not enough to get the meaning of scientific terms. In relation to these terms, students do not usually need to find them in the dictionary, since they are mostly from Latin or Greek roots and therefore very similar to those used in their native language (e.g. polychloroprene-polícloropreno, butadiene-butadieno, spectroscopy-espectroscopía). The failure to understand the content of the term because of its specificity is not necessarily a foreign language problem, but a problem of understanding in their own language (Fernández de Bobadilla, 1999).
- In relation to the information provided by the dictionary, Fernández de Bobadilla (1999) states that the student must know how to use it, especially in relation to two main aspects which tend to cause major difficulties in reading comprehension: the division of entries for meaning and grammatical category.

How Long Would It Take to Read the Whole Dictionary?

While most books live by the standard, front-cover-to-back-cover consumption format, dictionaries (and other reference books) don't play by the rules. The dictionary is meant to be consumed in bits and pieces, not fully read. One day someone might be reading page 64 of a dictionary, and the next day, boom, they're on page 697.

But what if the dictionary were to be read like a novel? What if someone did decide to undertake the challenge of reading the thing cover to cover? Exactly how long would that take?

What constitutes “*the*” dictionary?

Well, getting an exact amount of time is essentially impossible—both because of people's varied reading speeds and because of the many different options that could be considered “the dictionary.” “Modern readers have access to a wide variety of dictionaries of the English language, and...there is no single authoritative dictionary for the English language,” explains Dr. Adam Crowley, an associate professor of English in Husson University's College of Science and Humanities.

Dr. Crowley acknowledges that there are some dictionaries that tend to be more popular than others, of course, like the American Heritage Dictionary and the Oxford English Dictionary. But there are lots of varied options for what counts as “the” dictionary, because “there is no agreed-upon central dictionary...for English-speaking people. And there is good reason for this,” he adds, “as the English language is always expanding and changing with the addition of new words and new meanings for old words.” For instance, these 25 new words added to the dictionary in 2019 are only a tiny fraction of the hundreds and hundreds of words added every year. The existence of online dictionaries makes adding new words easier than ever.

So, does that mean it's impossible to find out how long it would take to read the dictionary? Well, not quite. Unsurprisingly, people have tested this; this is the Internet age, after all, and people have done far weirder things! So there have been a couple of conclusions reached about how long it would take to read a dictionary.

Result 1: A full year, in ten-hour chunks

Most mind-bogglingly, in 2008 a man named Ammon Shea read the entire Oxford English Dictionary—as in, the one with 20 different volumes. So this task didn't just include reading one book—it was reading 20 books, a total of 59 million words and 21,730 pages. And how long did it take him? Well, he didn't do it in one go. He made it his goal to read it all in one year, spending a maximum of ten hours every day reading. He didn't calculate his total time, though, as his goal wasn't to see how long it took him but simply to get it done in a year. And he did! Luckily, even his massive task didn't include slogging through the longest word in English, which understandably gets left out of dictionaries.

Result 2: Forty-one hours, minimum

But when you think “the dictionary,” you most likely imagine a single, albeit massive, book containing the most relevant words. Don't worry, that's been tackled too—sort of. In 2017, Christian Saunders, the founder of English-language teaching platform Canguro English, took on the “reading-the-dictionary” challenge as part of a promotion for World Teachers' Day. He and a team of more than 30 volunteers live-streamed themselves taking turns reading a 2,000-page version of the Oxford English Dictionary, to raise money to provide English education to refugees. Here, he provides his assessment of the experience as well as some footage of the reading.

But, as you'll see if you watch the video, there was a catch. Saunders and his colleagues' task was only to "read every single word in the Oxford Dictionary of English." They didn't actually read out the full definitions unless a word really tripped them up or piqued their interest. And just that took a whopping 41 straight hours; we can assume that actually reading out every word of every definition would have taken at least double that time.

So if these two massively varied results reveal anything, it's that the variations in what can be considered "the dictionary" means there really is no one definitive answer. But the good news is that if you're going to tackle this task, you're well within your rights to choose a shorter version of the dictionary. Since there's no single, universally accepted "dictionary," no one can tell you it doesn't count. Next, find out some more fun facts you never knew about dictionaries.

Why are dictionaries important?

You can use a dictionary to look up the meaning of any words that you don't understand. However, there are lots of different types of dictionaries, so which one should you use?

Let's look at some of the different types of dictionaries to see which will be most helpful to you during your studies. A dictionary is one of the most important tools during your time studying at a university. A good dictionary can help you understand your subject better, improve your communication and improve your grades by making sure you are using words correctly.

However, not all dictionaries are the same and if you don't know how to use a dictionary correctly, it could actually teach you the wrong meaning of a word and make it more difficult to get a good grade.

Look at the four different types of dictionary below. Which dictionary do you think is the best choice when you don't understand a new word?

Bilingual dictionary

A bilingual dictionary is a dictionary that has the word you are looking for translated into your own language. A bilingual dictionary usually only has a small amount of information about the word you are looking for but it is easy to understand because it is written in your native language.

Monolingual dictionary

A monolingual dictionary is written only in English. A monolingual dictionary has lots of different information about every word in English. These dictionaries have lots of information about grammar and pronunciation. A monolingual dictionary can sometimes be confusing because it has multiple definitions for every word.

Learner dictionary

A learner dictionary is similar to a monolingual dictionary because it is only in English and has lots of information about the word you are trying to find. However, a learner dictionary is a little bit easier to use than a standard monolingual dictionary and has clear examples and simplified language.

A subject-specific dictionary

A subject-specific dictionary is similar to a monolingual dictionary but it does not contain the general meaning of words, only the definitions that are suitable for the specific subject. Subject-specific dictionaries are very useful when you need to find out how a word is used differently in your subject area but they can be quite difficult to use and might not contain the word you are looking for.

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