Translation, the Key or the Equivalent?  
*a study of the dictionary use strategies of Finnish senior secondary school students*

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1. Introduction

It has long been the desire of lexicographers and publishers alike to find out as much as they can about the needs, wishes and skills of dictionary users, so that they can customize their products accordingly. To this end, numerous questionnaire and test studies have been conducted over the past few decades. The study under discussion was based on a test aimed to compare how well Finnish senior secondary school students make use of the information available to them in the representatives of two dictionary archetypes, the bilingual dictionary (represented in the test by *English-Finnish General Dictionary* and *Finnish-English General Dictionary*) and the bilingualized dictionary (represented by *Englannin opiskelijan sanakirja*, a bilingualized version of the *Collins Cobuild New Student's Dictionary*). The author was part of the editorial team responsible for the bilingualization of the Cobuild dictionary. A similar type of bilingualized dictionary was first published in Finland as part of Kernerman Semi-Bilingual Dictionaries in 1993 (*Password English Dictionary for Speakers of Finnish*).

2. Different dictionary types

It is well documented that the EFL dictionary market is still characterized by a rigid dichotomy, that is, the battle between the monolingual and the bilingual dictionary. The monolingual dictionary is favored by language teachers, who feel that monolinguals contain more information about the foreign language (L2) than bilinguals (see, for example, Atkins 1985). More importantly, monolinguals present their L2 information in L2. With their definitions and examples, they make every dictionary search a useful experience in more ways than the one perhaps originally intended; besides pinpointing the meaning of a headword, the user finds out about its collocations, learns how to paraphrase it, and receives several good examples of how to use it in a sentence. In addition, the user learns to think in L2 instead of relating every new word he or she comes across to his or her own mother tongue (L1). The drawback of monolinguals is that they are often difficult to use for a beginner. With their L2 definitions, grammar codes and lengthy entries, they may leave the user confused and unsatisfied, but their main problem is that they are inherently circular; the L2 definitions may send the user searching all over the dictionary for the meanings of the words contained by the definition. What is more, if the user wants to express something in L2 but does not know the necessary words, he/she is unable to start searching from among the L2 headwords of the monolingual dictionary.

Bilingual dictionaries, on the other hand, are reviled by EFL teachers because they help students maintain a ‘translation barrier’: by concentrating on isolated headwords and their equivalents, they keep up the students’ habit of relating every new word they learn to their L1. The listing of equivalents is particularly harmful because of the anisomorphic nature of languages (Zgusta 1971). All languages have a unique way of naming and organizing reality, which means that full equivalence is, in fact, quite rare outside of terminology. Neat juxtaposition of headwords and equivalents may keep the student under the illusion that there is always full equivalence between the lexemes of two different languages and, what is worse, that the equivalent can be inserted to all contexts the student might come across. The illusion is made all the more dangerous by the fact that bilinguals rarely provide enough information on how to use the headwords or their equivalents in an actual textual environment. Bilinguals are nevertheless easier to use than monolinguals and they provide instant answers. For these reasons, bilingual dictionaries are the popular choice among students, especially in the beginner and intermediate levels.

The bilingualized dictionary is, of course, the supposedly happy marriage of the two above-mentioned paradigms. It contains the L2 definitions and examples of the monolingual dictionary and the easy-to-use L1 equivalents of the bilingual dictionary. (This type of dictionary is often based on an existing monolingual learner’s dictionary.) The emphasis in the entries is on the L2 material, and for this reason the equivalents are often called ‘keys’, as they are rather aids for understanding than stand-alone translations of the headword. The user is supposed to turn to the definitions and examples first, and if the meaning of the headword still remains somewhat unclear, the key is there to provide clarification and reassurance (cf. Reif 1987). If the bilingualized dictionary is equipped with an index of all the keys used, the user...
also has handles by which to access the L2 headwords when in need of an L1-L2 translation. In short, the bilingualized dictionary can be seen as an all-in-one solution to the needs of a learner’s dictionary user.

The bilingualized paradigm, however, does not escape all criticism. The concept of the key is slightly problematic, as the key should be a competent L1 translation, but simultaneously draw as little attention to itself as possible. There is a danger that the user may skip definitions and examples altogether and only pick up the instant translation proffered by the key (Nakamoto 1995). Furthermore, the index is a double-edged sword in the hands of an inexperienced user. Since it contains only the keys used in the entries, it is by no means a representative sample of the L1. It merely puts on display the reactions of the dictionary editors to a series of L2 situations, that is, the entries of the original monolingual dictionary. At worst, the index could be used as a misleading and incomplete L1-L2 dictionary.

3. The test

The bilingualized dictionary used in the test, Englannin opiskelijan sanakirja, is aimed specifically at senior secondary school students. As its Codubuild background implies, all its definitions are in simple English consisting of complete sentences (“if you X something, you Y it”; “an X is a Y”), and its examples are culled from the Bank of English, a corpus of newspaper, literary and spoken texts. There are few symbols or abbreviations in the entries, and each headword is complemented with at least one key in Finnish. There is only one key per headword whenever possible, as it is crucial that the user not get bogged down in the Finnish part of the entry, but concentrate on the information in English instead. With 35,000 headwords, it displays only the essential vocabulary of the English language.

The bilingual dictionaries that were used, English-Finnish General Dictionary and Finnish-English General Dictionary, are much more comprehensive (90,000 and 160,000 headwords, respectively) than Englannin opiskelijan sanakirja. The information contained in them is packed very densely with the help of abbreviations, symbols, parentheses, tildes and other space-saving methods. In addition, there can be dozens of headwords in a single entry, which sometimes makes finding the necessary information a time-consuming task. The dictionaries contain some made-up examples of how to use the equivalents, but these are often short phrases lacking vital collocations.

The test described in this study was devised to determine which type of dictionary, bilingual or bilingualized, would be more helpful to a completely untutored user working in an actual textual environment. The test consisted of sixteen translation assignments, eight from English into Finnish and eight from Finnish into English. The study was decided to be conducted in the form of a test, because observation studies would have required too much time and manpower, and surveys can be a rather unreliable source of information: the subject might give answers that he/she thinks are appropriate, or he/she might misunderstand the questions. A translation test was chosen over a reading comprehension test on the grounds that in a reading comprehension test, the subjects could use guessing techniques to deduce the correct answer from the textual context. Finally, open-form assignments were chosen over a multiple-choice study so that the subjects could not reach the correct answer by way of eliminating the least plausible options. As the subjects were confronted with English source text words they did not know, or with Finnish source text words they did not know how to translate into English, they resorted to dictionaries in a natural, unforced manner. In other words, dictionary use was dictated by the situation, not the test form. More than one word was usually required in the translation, which made it possible to reach an acceptable answer in more ways than one. To avoid the pitfalls that have proved to be the undoing of many dictionary tests and surveys in the past, the work of Nesi (2000) proved to be a useful guide.

The test group comprised of twenty Finnish senior secondary school students, all of whom had at least 9 (out of 10) as their previous English module grade number. The point in choosing apt students was to prevent the test from deteriorating into a cavalcade of simple grammar mistakes, which would have undermined the original intent of testing language learners for their dictionary use skills rather than their elementary language skills. The students were divided into two groups of ten, one using the bilingualized dictionary and the other using the bilingual dictionaries. The students had had no prior guidance in the use of dictionaries apart from the exhortations of their teachers to use monolinguals and distrust bilinguals. They had 105 minutes to fill sixteen blank spots with the help of the Finnish and English source texts. The texts were fairly long, so there was little time to contemplate proper search strategies. Hopefully, this made it
possible to record the students’ instinctive reaction to the information on offer in the
dictionaries.

The test was completed twice, once without any dictionary and once with a
chance to make use of the dictionaries. In
the first round, the students were asked
under every blank spot whether they were
satisfied with the translation themselves.
In the dictionary round, two new questions
were asked in addition to the satisfaction
question: on what page(s) the student had
found information useful for the translation,
and how many searches he/she had made
in the dictionary.

To illustrate, one English-Finnish blank
spot in the dictionary round looked like this
(the English passage requiring translation
is *likely to be diluted or shelved*):

...a ban on snowmobiles in the park, due
to come into effect in two years’ time, is
likely to be diluted or shelved.

...puiston moottorikelkkakielto, jonka
pitäisi astua voimaan kahden vuoden
päästä,

page(s): ____________
no. of searches: _______
satisfied (y/n)? ______

4. The results

When the answers to the dictionary use
questions were analyzed and compared to
the actual translations, it was possible to
“triangulate” quite reliably, whether the
students had used their dictionary, where
they had gone to search for information,
what kind of information they had found
there, and what they thought of its
usefulness.

The test translations were marked
according to two criteria: they had to fit
in to the sentence around them and they
had to represent the meaning of the source
text accurately, leaving nothing out. The
open-endedness of the translations may
have left the test scores somewhat open for
debate, as there were quite a few translation
proposals that were not clear-cut correct
or incorrect cases; in future tests, it would
be advisable to have more than one marker
available in order to reach some sort of
consensus in such cases. The blank spots
were chosen so that the students could not
simply copy a key or an equivalent from
the dictionary. Instead, they were often
forced to adapt the translations provided
in the entry to make the translation adequate.
It was important to gauge the adaptability
of the students; should a user fail to do any
thinking on her/his own and simply accept
the key or the equivalent at face value, any
extra information present in the entries,
such as the definitions and examples of
the bilingualized dictionary, is rendered
useless.

Content analysis of the students’
translations revealed that the students
often used their dictionaries uncritically.
A prime example would be the translation
of the word *seething* in the context
*seething sulphur spring*. The bilingualized
dictionary offered the key *kuhiseva*, an
adjective used to describe a place full of
something that is animate. Most students
went for this key, with the resulting
translation, *kuhiseva rikkilähdä*, being
something of an absurdity, since a seething
sulphur spring can hardly sustain much
life. In another case, the text “natural assets”
was translated word-for-word with help of
the dictionary, a strategy which resulted
in a nonsense concept *luonnolliset varat*,
“nature-like assets”. The most serious
problem was, however, that the students
used the Finnish-English index as a
dictionary of its own and seldom bothered
to consult the actual dictionary after they
had located an English word in the index.
This resulted in errors when there was
something unusual about the inflection
of the word or there were several headwords
to choose from, but nothing to give clues
about the suitability of each word for the
context at hand.

The bilingual dictionary, with its dense
entries full of symbols and abbreviations,
caused difficulties for many students,
especially when the necessary headword
or equivalent was concealed inside a long
entry. Lack of entry navigation skills
was a problem especially during the
Finnish-English test, as the students could
not simply deduce the correct English
equivalent from a long string like they could
when faced with Finnish equivalents.

One major source of translation errors
in both groups was the students’ inability
to make some translations fit in with the
surrounding text. A missing definite or
indefinite article or a wrong case ending
could make all the difference between a
successful and an unsuccessful translation.
In such cases, there was little any dictionary
could do to help, and in some instances
the test measured the language skills and
translator’s instincts of the students as
much as their dictionary use skills.

Examination of the test scores revealed
that the bilingualized dictionary users
improved their performance from the first
(non-dictionary) round more than the
bilingual dictionary users. Due to the small
size of the sample, it is impossible to
make any universal statements. It can
be said, however, that despite all the
translation errors caused by poor use of