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DICTIONARY News

Allowing a Dictionary in the Examination Room

by Raphael Gefen

The ability to use a dictionary efficiently and speedily is a well-known language learning skill, and is an aspect of *fluency* or *pragmatic (strategic) competence* within the framework of that *communicative competence* which is accepted today in the foreign language teaching world as the goal of language learning. Moreover, the other two components of communicative competence are also provided by intensive dictionary work - *accuracy (linguistic competence)*, ie, exact meaning, spelling, etc, and *appropriacy (sociolinguistic competence)*, ie, register, dialect, style.

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A "Top-Bottom" Educational Reform

However, in order to introduce dictionary work into the school system and especially in order to familiarise pupils with all that dictionaries have to offer (not just the meaning, translated or paraphrased or both), teachers should encourage pupils to see dictionaries as a resource of independent learning, constantly by their side, and in this way become less dependent on the teacher.

The most effective means of introducing dictionaries into the classroom is to allow their use in the examination room. It is well known throughout the teaching profession that educational reform is most often a *top-bottom* process: decisions are reached by policy-makers at the head of the educational system and are then passed down to the school level. Needless to say, the final examination is the best means of ensuring a change in the classroom, in teacher-training, and in school administration. Thus, allowing the dictionary into the examination means adding a valuable resource to school teaching painlessly and immediately, what practitioners and experts in foreign-language testing call *examination-driven instruction*.

Of course, there are "progressive educationists" who decry *exam-driven instruction* and indeed exams in general. But policy-makers and the leaders of the profession know otherwise: if the examination embodies educational reforms and answers the needs of communicative competence, it will be the most successful means of changing the syllabus and the methodology at the "chalkface" of the classroom.

Vocabulary is Infinite

Stimulating education reform is not the only justification for including a dictionary as auxiliary material in the examination. From a purely linguistic point of view, we see that of the three domains of language proficiency, two (pronunciation and grammar) are finite, and one (vocabulary)

is infinite. Pupils may be excused sometimes for thinking that English grammar is never-ending, but of course the list of rules and patterns is limited and we can reasonably expect that candidates in an examination should know English grammar, or most of it. This expectation cannot apply to vocabulary. A national syllabus may contain a few thousand items as essential core vocabulary for productive use but cannot go beyond this without thereby dictating the contents of textbooks, etc. The Israel syllabus, for example, specifies about 5000 items and instructs teachers to make sure pupils know a further 5000 productive items, based on whatever textbook or other course material is used. It does not make any specifications with regard to comprehension vocabulary.

On the assumption that the final examination is not based on a set textbook (it should not be, if the aim of the syllabus is the acquisition of communicative competence in a democratic society) and that the English of the test is authentic and at a relatively high level, there can be no guarantee that all the candidates will have learnt the same words. Some words will probably be unfamiliar to all the candidates - with an authentic text, even native speakers may not always be sure of the exact meaning of each word. On the contrary, a weak learner may by sheer chance have picked up a particular word or phrase occurring in the text, which a good student, again by sheer chance, does not happen to know. This does not reflect all-round language proficiency.

Allowing a dictionary into the examination will remove this anomaly, so that there is no element of sheer chance. All candidates will have the same right to use a dictionary, and in all probability the weak learner will not be able to use it as efficiently as the good learner will. Furthermore, the exam-writer will be able to choose reading passages, etc, with a clear conscience regarding the level of vocabulary difficulty.