

Determining the Priority in Vocabulary when Learning English through Electronic Dictionaries

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Abstract

The article investigates how English electronic dictionaries determine priority in vocabulary so that L2 learners know which words they ought to learn first. The primary objective of this study is to provide information on the criteria according to which electronic dictionaries categorise the vocabulary of the English language so that the foreign language learners now which words are assigned priority. The following dictionaries were analysed: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 8th Edition (2015), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th Edition (2014), Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4th Edition (2013) and MacMillan English Dictionary – the online edition.

Key words: electronic dictionary, English vocabulary, priority, frequency, L2 learner

Introduction

Without words, communication in any language is scarcely possible. Thus, building vocabulary retains a major priority in L2 learning since it is a significant aspect of foreign language acquisition and obviously, L2 acquisition has been regarded as complex and complicated process (Janikova, 2014: 29). Furthermore, mastering lexical units (particularly those which form the lexical side of speech in a foreign language) is considered to be difficult (Vasbieva, 2015: 57). One of the potential strategies employed when L2 learners encounter an unknown word is using a dictionary, which naturally generates a great deal of thinking about meaning (Lelakova, 2010). Until recently, thick and bulky paper dictionaries dominated the market, since they were the only available dictionaries at learners' disposal. Nowadays, paper dictionaries are being substituted for the electronic ones, which are easy to access and possess a user-friendly interface. Using a computer keyboard, foreign language learners are in just a few seconds exposed to a word and its form (written and spoken), meaning, grammar, usage, collocations, importance and the like. Therefore, electronic dictionaries appear to be more convenient and efficient than their predecessors. Moreover, they represent a rather appealing source for enhancing vocabulary of foreign language learners who are now being raised in the new era of digital age. One of the features these dictionaries are typical for is that they categorize words according to their frequency, importance and usefulness. Hence L2 learners can understand the significance of words they come across and they themselves can determine the priority when learning vocabulary.

Electronic dictionaries and their wide appeal

The interest in using the electronic versions of dictionaries is on the rise. According to H. Nesi (2002) and K. D. Chatzidimou (2007), L2 learners have a positive attitude towards using them - they regard electronic dictionaries as beneficial and claim that they also facilitate their learning. Moreover, foreign language teaching represent a dynamically developing discipline (Zelenkova, 2015: 46). There are also studies which prove that the use of electronic dictionaries yields more satisfactory

results. A. A. Zarei and A. A. Gujjar (2012) conducted an experimental study in which they analysed what effect paper and electronic dictionaries have on learning vocabulary. Electronic dictionaries were used by an experimental group and paper dictionaries were used by a control group. The results reflected more considerable improvement concerning the subjects' vocabulary within the experimental group in comparison to the control group. Similarly, M. H. Flynn (2007) examined what influence electronic dictionaries, paper dictionaries and no dictionaries on vocabulary and reading have. It has been found out that those who used paper dictionaries achieved higher scores. However, the use of electronic dictionaries led to achieving even more impressive results with regard to comprehension and vocabulary in comparison to the paper dictionaries. Furthermore, electronic dictionaries contain a number of useful and convenient features: academic words indication, help with writing, possibilities of making one's own word lists, opportunities to make one's own notes and comments within words, a chance to record learner's own pronunciation and subsequently compare it with a dictionary pronunciation, advanced search, recorded example sentences, vocabulary practice, grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary sections, exercises for particular examinations and the like.

Determining the priority in vocabulary and word frequency

The information on word frequency has been an inseparable component of electronic dictionaries for L2 learners of English. The review of previous versions of the dictionaries indicates that the information on the word frequency is predominantly based on **raw frequency**. Hence, distributed frequency regarding various genres was not taken into account. Another interesting fact was that in 2008 it was pointed out that despite the fact that corpora had been considerably used for compiling dictionaries, dictionaries mainly focused on written data, not paying attention to the spoken language. Moreover, some doubts were raised concerning the reliability of indicating the frequency, since the following issues had not been addressed adequately: text types and the quantity of texts, the number of occurrences of a word in various texts, the balance of written and spoken text varieties and the like (Bogaards, 2008; Hanhong, 2010).

We have chosen the four major dictionaries for conducting the analysis: Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 9th Edition (2015) – OALD 9, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th Edition (2014) - LDOCE6 – online edition, Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4th Edition (2013) – CALD 3 – CD Rom and MacMillan English Dictionary – the online edition - MED. OALD 9, LDOCE 6 and CALD 4 have been officially purchased; MED is only available online for free. All four dictionaries are monolingual dictionaries and they are widely used by millions of foreign language learners all over the world. The dictionaries attempt to clarify the word meaning and such clarification is done through lexicographic definitions (Hornackova-Klapicova, 2012: 4).

Before revealing the description of the four dictionaries and their latest editions, we offer the information on previous editions. Figure 1 demonstrates the frequency indication of the previous editions of the dictionaries.

Electronic Learner's Dictionary	Frequency Symbol	Frequency Indication
<i>LDOCE5</i>	W1 W2 W3 S1 S2 S3	W1: Most frequent 1000 written words W2: Between 1001 and 2000 most frequent written words W3: Between 2001 and 3000 most frequent written words S1: Most frequent 1000 spoken words S2: Between 1001 and 2000 most frequent spoken words S3: Between 2001 and 3000 most frequent spoken words
<i>OALD7</i>		Words in Oxford 3000 which are frequent across a range of different types of texts
<i>CALD3</i>	ⓔ ⓖ ⓗ	Essential: a common, useful and important word to know Improver: a word to help you improve beyond basic English Advanced: a word to make your English sound advanced
<i>MED2</i>	★★★ ★★ ★	3-star: the 2500 most common and basic English words 2-star: very common words 1-star: fairly common words

Figure 1 Marking the frequency in previous versions of electronic dictionaries (Hanhong, 2010, p. 218)

LDOCE 5 indicates the frequency of the 3000 most frequent words both written and spoken. OALD 7 introduces the 3000 keywords which are based on the frequency across a range of different text types. CALD 3 differentiates between the “essential words”, “improver words” and “advanced words”. MED 2 uses the star rating system, giving three stars to the 2,500 most frequent words, two stars to very common words and one star to fairly common words. It appears that the criterion of frequency overwhelmingly dominates with regard to determining the priority in vocabulary learning. Nonetheless, employing a higher number of criteria would perhaps result in selecting the more appropriate words.

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English 6th Edition (LDOCE 6)

LDOCE categorizes its vocabulary on the basis of frequency. Traditionally, Longman dictionaries have accentuated the 3,000 most frequent words in the English language so that the L2 learners could determine the priority in their vocabulary. Moreover, the learners were able to understand 86% of the language using the 3,000 words. Nonetheless, if a foreign language learner wishes to comprehend vast variety of various texts, the recent research indicates that one may need to know up to 9,000 word families. Hence, the list of 9,000 most frequent words came into being. The words have been carefully selected after a thorough analysis of the Longman Corpus Network (containing 390 million words) was performed. This list is known as the Longman Communication 9,000. **The 9,000 words are highlighted for the first time in the 6th Edition of LDOCE.** Learners can notice them easily since they are shown in red colour. The words are classified into three different sections, which are labelled with circles (LDOCE 6, 2014, p. 2126).

- high-frequency words – indicates the 3000 most frequent words;
- mid-frequency words – indicates the next 3000 most frequent words;
- lower-frequency words – indicates the next 3000 most frequent words.

Moreover, LDOCE 6 offers information on the spoken and written frequency of words.

S1 **W1** refers to the 1000 most frequent words in spoken or written English.

S2 **W2** refers to the next 1000 most frequent words in spoken or written English;

S3 **W3** refers to the next 1000 most frequent words in spoken or written English.

The vital thing that needs to be emphasized about the Longman Communication 9000 is that it the frequency of words in the English language is not the only criterion. It is also based on the comprehensive analysis of the Longman Learner's Corpus and on the thorough analysis of coursebooks (elementary to advanced levels). Therefore, the Longman Communication 9000 represents the words of highest importance for L2 learners. Foreign language learners should learn them if they wish to communicate effectively (LDOCE 6, 2014, p. 2126).

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary 9th Edition (OALD 9)

OALD 9 uses the Oxford 3000 regarding the determination of priority in vocabulary. It includes the 3000 most important words L2 learners should learn in English. These words are displayed in the dictionary having a key symbol next to them. Assiduous attention was paid when these keywords were being selected. Thus, their importance and usefulness indicate that these words should be given a priority when L2 learners study the vocabulary of the English language. The words in OALD9 were selected according to the following criteria.

1. **Frequency** – both British National Corpus and the Oxford Corpus Collection prepared ground for the information on the words occurring most frequently in the English language. “A corpus is an electronically-held collection of written or spoken texts, often consisting of hundreds of millions of words” (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries).
2. **Range** – Although there exist words which are used frequently, they may be only found in specific texts, for example scientific articles. Hence, the Oxford 3000 keywords are used frequently and they occur in diverse contexts.
3. **Familiarity** – the list contains words of crucial importance which cannot be used frequently despite the fact that most users of English are familiar with them. Such vocabulary includes for example the parts of the human body, words used when travelling and the like. More than 70 experts within teaching and language studies have selected the words taking the criterion of familiarity into consideration (Oxford Learner's Dictionaries; OALD 9).

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary 4th Edition (CALD 4)

CALD 4 uses a rather different tool with regard to determining the priority in vocabulary learning. It labels its words with the following symbols: A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. The symbols demonstrate the words, meanings and phrases that L2 learners know at various levels, which arise out of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. When no level is indicated, the word is above the C2 level. Hence, a foreign language learner can see and decide for themselves which words ought to be given priority in their vocabulary learning. It is interesting that CALD 4 does not provide its users with the “key” or “core” vocabulary indication. These are the levels at which words occur (Cambridge Dictionaries; CALD 4):

A1 Beginner
A2 Elementary
B1 Intermediate
B2 Upper-Intermediate
C1 Advanced
C2 Proficiency

Macmillan Dictionary

No edition specification is mentioned here since the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners (2007) was the last printed version of this popular dictionary. On their website, Macmillan claims that the figures have been displaying

decrease in sales and that, on the other hand, the amount of online dictionary users has increased dramatically. Hence, it appears the users themselves had made the decision with regard to stop printing paper dictionaries.

Macmillan has conducted extensive research into text studies; books newspapers, essays, reviews or conversations have been carefully analysed. Despite the fact that English has up to 1 million words, it seems that the native speakers of English use only 7,500 words within the 90% of their speaking and writing. Therefore, these words could be considered to be the core vocabulary of English. Macmillan has marked such words with red stars and the words have been selected according to how frequently they are used in the English language. The words with three stars represent the most common 2,500 words, the words with two stars are the next 2,500 most common words, and the words with one star show the next 2,500 most common words in the English language. The vital thing to mention is that the red-star words are thoroughly described - the information on grammar, collocation, register, pragmatics and the like is also provided so that foreign learners have a chance to use these words correctly and properly. As far as the black words are concerned, these represent rather receptive vocabulary. Hence, L2 learners possibly ought to know the meaning of such words, but they do not need to know to use them actively when writing or speaking. In connection with this, D. Gondova (2012, p. 114) claims that: "The notions receptive and productive knowledge of vocabulary are used in the same meaning as passive and active vocabulary. A learner's passive vocabulary includes the words learners can understand but they don't use yet, or they do not use them anymore because they have forgotten them." However, some black words are highly likely to become the red words in the future (for example the word "tweet") and vice-versa – if a red word is not used to a certain degree, it will turn black (Macmillan Dictionary).

Conclusion

The analysis of the four selected dictionaries indicates that lexicographers and experts in this field have done considerable amount of job. The 6th version of LDOCE contains the Longman Communication 9,000 (6th Edition is the first one ever to use the Longman Communication 9,000) as the research indicates that in order to understand the vast majority of texts, one has to be aware of as many as 9,000 words. Hence the term. Furthermore, LDOCE 6 offers information on how frequently the words can be found in written and spoken texts and marks the 3,000 most frequent words in written English and the 3,000 most frequent words in spoken English with symbols.

OALD 9 adopts systematic approach towards creating the Oxford 3,000 list, directing meticulous attention to the frequency, range and familiarity of vocabulary. Therefore, frequency is not the only criterion and OALD 9 takes also into consideration whether the words can be found in various texts and the familiarity factor – some words might not be used frequently, but are of immense importance, for example the parts of human body.

CALD 4 has developed a different strategy in determining the priority in vocabulary for the L2 learners. The words in the dictionary are labelled with A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2 – demonstrating the level at which L2 learners should know the word. If there is no label, the words are above the C2 level.

MED marks its word with red stars, assigning three red stars to words which represent the most common 2,500 words, two red stars to words representing the next most common 2,500 words and giving one red star to the next most common 2,500 words.

To summarize, LDOCE 6, OALD 9 and CALD 4 endeavour to offer the English learners words which appear to be of cardinal importance for successful communication and for being able to understand diverse genres and various texts.

CALD 4 categorizes words according to the CEFR levels – displaying the words which L2 learners need to know at various levels and thus showing the words which need to be assigned a high priority. In conclusion, all four dictionaries adopt a systematic approach to classifying vocabulary, taking into account also other criteria apart from the raw frequency.

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