

Should our students be using dictionaries for extensive reading?

by Daniel Stewart

Some people think students doing extensive reading (ER) should never use dictionaries while others recommend their use. According to Luppescu and Day, "many teachers have definite views on whether dictionaries should or should not be used. These views are not based on any empirical evidence" (Luppescu and Day, 1993, p. 277). While there is not much empirical evidence, there are several common sense arguments for either side of the issue. Those in favor of dictionary use say they help improve vocabulary, aid reading comprehension, make reading in a foreign language more comfortable for students and improve dictionary skills. Furthermore, teachers can help students by checking how often they use dictionaries and then suggesting heavy dictionary users try reading graded readers of a lower level. Those who dis-

286 junior high students the SLEP test. It is made by the same people as the TOEFL, but it is for younger students. After eight months of ER they took the SLEP test again. Low level readers who occasionally used a dictionary improved more than those who never used one or those who used a dictionary a lot. But with medium level readers, it was students who never used a dictionary who improved the most. At some point, which I call the Dict-free Point, students are better off without a dictionary. So it seems the amount of reading experience your students have should decide whether they use dictionaries for ER.

Advice

What does this mean to a teacher involved in an ER programme? We will look at three issues: who should be



courage dictionary use say it is unpleasant and they want reading to be pleasurable. They point out that it interrupts reading fluency and that readers rarely use a dictionary to read in their first language (L1). They suggest it slows down reading speed and that dictionary use is often confusing as words can have many different meanings. They feel skipping or guessing the meaning from context can be more effective. Finally, they state banning dictionary use is an effective way to distinguish extensive reading from intensive reading.

While both sides have good points, an extensive literature search found neither position more convincing than the other. Therefore, I did my own experiment to help clarify this issue. At the start of the school year I gave

using dictionaries, when they should stop using them and what

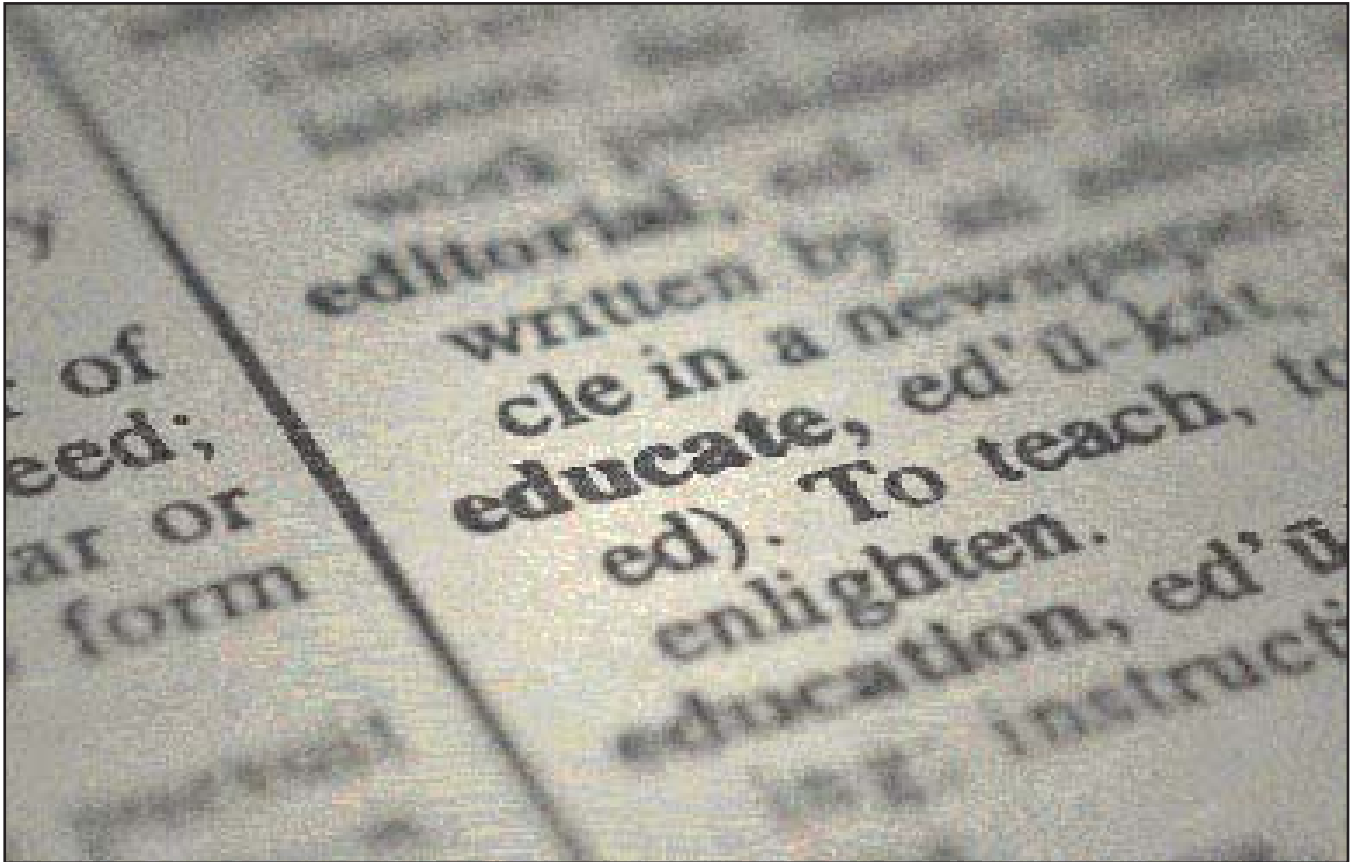
dictionary skills you should teach your students.

Who should use dictionaries?

The simple answer is that if a student wants to use a dictionary when reading extensively, then let them, but they should be told the goal is to learn to read without one as they do in their native language.

When should they stop using them?

First, students should skip over unknown words and keep reading if possible. If the word is important they will soon start to lose track of the meaning of the passage. If they can still understand the message without under-



Next, they can check their guess with a dictionary. They can make sure the meaning they get from the dictionary actually fits the sentence and paragraph. Some system is needed to show when words are being looked up more than once. Writing down any new words in a notebook can be very good for vocabulary development, but might slow down reading too much. A better solution might be to write an 'x' in the dictionary beside a word when they look it up. Then if they find they are looking up the same word more than once, it could be studied more directly with word cards.

Once students find they are rarely losing track of the overall meaning of a story despite unknown words, they have likely reached the Dict-free point. Their ability to figure out overall meaning is now advanced enough that they should try ER without a dictionary.

What skills should I teach my students?

Using a dictionary is a skill. You have to learn how to do it. Nesi has shown that students make many mistakes because they use dictionaries incorrectly (Nesi, 2000). For example, they follow the kidrule strategy when using a dictionary. This involves scanning a definition for a familiar word and replacing the unknown word with the known one. If a student finds 'transitory' defined as 'passing soon; lasting only a short time' they might create a sentence such as 'My birthday cake was transitory'. All too often language teachers assume their students can use a dictionary because they know how to use one in their L1. Here are

some key points you should go over with your students at the start of your extensive reading programme. First of all, teach them the basic prefixes such as un, in, dis etc. That way they will look up believable instead of searching in vain for unbelievable. Idiomatic chunks can also be difficult as students might not know which word to look up in a chunk such as 'to buy time'. Tell students in most cases it is best to look up the verb. Another problem is that one word might have many different meanings such as 'bear'. Unfortunately as Neubach and Cohen found, students often only look at the first definition (Neubach and Cohen, 1988). Tell students to try out the meanings they find and not to expect the first meaning be the best one. Looking at the part of speech can be helpful for this.

Conclusion

Should students use dictionaries in ER? I think it is best to leave the choice up to them, but to encourage them to reach the point, the Dict-free point, where they no longer need to use a dictionary. If they do decide to use a dictionary, make sure they have the skills to use a dictionary well in their second language.

References

- Luppescu, S. & Day, R. R. (1993). Reading, dictionaries and vocabulary learning. *Language Learning*, 43(2), 263-287.
- Nesi, H. (2000). The use and abuse of EFL dictionaries. How learners of English as a foreign language read and interpret dictionary entries. Tübingen, Germany: Niemeyer.
- Neubach, A. & Cohen, A. D. (1988). Processing strategies and