Reading Comprehension with Online Dictionaries

CH. SUDHEER

Associate Professor, M.V.R College of Engineering and Technology, PARITALA, A.P

ABSTRACT

The online dictionary as a new electronic product has opened up a new range of tasks to facilitate reading comprehension and has become an efficient teaching-aid for English learning. This paper is intended to illustrate the practical application of online dictionaries in reading classroom activities based on the essence of reading. Some widely used online dictionaries in English learning are recommended in the paper. And a specific task using one online dictionary as an example is designed to show how to efficiently use the resources in the dictionaries to facilitate reading comprehension with encouraged output. The tasks of this kind can also provide rich information for teachers' research use to testify the efficiency of online dictionaries in reading lessons and explore more on their applications in English teaching and learning.

Keywords: online dictionaries; reading; task, application, learners, information.

INTRODUCTION

To make authentic texts comprehensible to ESL/EFL learners is a major objective in English teaching. Usually dictionary work is the indispensable support in reading, since information resource from dictionaries contributes to better comprehension as a kind of comprehensible input for learners. In general, learners consult dictionaries when they want to understand or communicate in English (McAlpine & Johanne, 2003).

However, learners still have the problem of finding out correct meanings of unknown words or phrases in certain context with one or two dictionaries of print form. Sometimes information in dictionaries of print form is constrained to be "passive": learners have to find several dictionaries for comprehensive and appropriate information, which is time-consuming and sometimes hinders the reading process.

Nowadays the widespread implementation of computer-assisted language learning offers more opportunities to easily and efficiently get "active" information of words in context. Support for comprehensible input from the online dictionaries can be an effective response to specific learner needs (McAlpine, Janice; Myles, Johanne, 2003) through the screen in a short time. This paper is intended to show the advantages of online dictionaries in helping to improve reading comprehension, and its possible applications in some task-based activities for college English teaching instruction and learners' efficient English learning.

RATIONALE OF USING ONLINE DICTIONARIES TO FACILITATE READING COMPREHENSION

On Reading and Dictionaries

In Carter R. & Nunan D. (2001), Wallace points out that reading can be seen as practice, product and process. In terms of the practice perspective, reading is linked to its uses in everyday life: practice for the literacy concerning social and cultural settings. It is purpose-oriented in some way: through reading, learners extend their horizon of knowledge and come to more profoundly understand the world around them. "Focus on text " is the main feature when reading is considered as a kind of product. Form, meaning, and other text-based features at word and sentence level are emphasized for training reader skills. Most English learners stay at this level, especially in classroom learning. Seeing reading as a process focuses on the reader's role in reading. This process involves readers' "affective or critical engagement with the text

" (Carter & Nunan, 2001). It is a demanding and active process that needs the knowledge of the linguistic code, cognitive processing skills, contextual cues, schema-based understanding, and the individual's knowledge of the world to achieve the goal of comprehension (Peters, 2007). It emphasizes the importance of individual's comprehensive competence.

So as intermediate learners, college students are supposed to integrate practice, product and process of reading as a whole in order to meet the standards of the syllabus. They need a lot of help to improve their reading ability, among which the dictionary is an absolutely necessary tool. Dictionaries provide abundant information for learners: learners can find specific word lists to enlarge their vocabulary, for the purpose of reading more authentic materials in their own field; they can find notes about cultures, societies in dictionaries to improve their English literacy. This embodies the practice perspective of reading in terms of dictionary use.

Moreover, dictionaries meet the needs of reading as a product perfectly. The main characteristic of dictionaries is to supply amount of materials concerning word explanation, collocations, word usage in different contexts and so on for learners to analyze the textual features of reading materials. And reading as a process challenges learners's capacity to make full use of resources in dictionaries. It involves learners' unambiguous goal while reading, their learning autonomy, reading strategies, etc.

Generally, most teachers advocate some authoritative dictionaries such as Oxford Advanced Learners' Dictionary, Longman Dictionary of Contemporary Dictionary, etc. for learners to use in their learning since these dictionaries list more detailed information than those "pocket" ones. But the dictionaries mentioned above are thick in print form and not convenient to carry about. So instead of using these "big" dictionaries, most learners prefer to use "pocket" dictionaries that contain less words and only information of word translation. Some dictionaries don't contain enough detailed and comprehensive information to meet learners' needs. All these have posed a great concern in English teaching and learning.

Online Dictionaries

The rapid information process of computer as well as the enormous information storage capacity seem to be an effective means to the above dilemma (Davies, 2005). Information globalization based on the network makes computer-assisted language learning and teaching develop so fast in education. Information on the Internet becomes one of the main learning and teaching resources. So as for the concern of dictionary use, the computer offers learners the opportunity to make full use of materials in dictionaries and improve their reading ability: to use online dictionaries.

The online dictionary is one type of electronic dictionaries and is built on the network. It is a very important online reference tool providing real time information that can be shared all over the world. The main characteristic of online dictionaries is the abundant resources they include. Learners just put the word in one online dictionary, it will offer detailed information about the word (lexical, semantic and syntactic information), and probably, it will offer extra information about the word in different online dictionaries for learners to have a more comprehensive knowledge.

In addition, some online dictionaries have pronunciation of the words, along with beautiful pictures, relevant video and audio materials, which engages learners in an impressive word world. Most importantly, the resources online are renewed constantly, so as for online dictionaries. As an electronic product, some online dictionaries enroll newly emerging words in time and temporally renew the word database, which meets the user needs to a larger extend than dictionaries of print form. Therefore, it is easy for learners to acquaint themselves with the latest trends of word knowledge by using online dictionaries (Nurmukhamedov, 2012). Sometimes learners may find there are some new words in newly edited textbooks that are not embodied in traditional dictionaries of print form, but they can find the proper meaning of these words in online dictionaries to achieve their comprehension goal.

Besides those advantages of online dictionaries mentioned above, they still have some other aspects that are superior to dictionaries of print form in helping to facilitate reading comprehension in English learning. With the essence content from traditional dictionaries, online dictionaries make it possible to form a global and open vocabulary database by means of hyperlinks. So it is convenient and quick to get ample information while reading. The function of translating on pointed words in some online dictionaries solves the problem of interfered reading with traditional dictionaries.

The information printed on the screen can be linked to other text resources and graphics, so learners can seek different levels of help according to their needs in reading. For example, some reading tasks are demanding since learners have to understand some cultural information embedded in the language, including the customs, religions and political systems of different countries and nationalities. Online dictionaries contain the information above and the information can be accessed by a click on certain hyperlinks. So online dictionaries play a role in expending the learners' horizon.

Learners can compare different online dictionaries and pick up the one suitable for their current language proficiency, so dictionaries are used more objectively and to the point. Besides, the screen can be used to enhance the interaction between the text and reader. The vocabulary tests and games create a friendly atmosphere for learning words to get better comprehension in authentic reading materials.

So to use online dictionaries for language learning and teaching is efficient and caters for the gist of CALL. Some studies have proved this point.

Peter (2007)'s study suggested that computerized reading may promote a deeper level of text comprehension since learners had more chances to make correct inferences while reading with effective look-up behavior. By providing a concise description of semantic and syntactic features of an online monolingual dictionary for English learners, Rizo-Rodriguez(2009) found that learners show unanimously positive feelings toward computerized help for their reading comprehension. Nurmukhamedov (2012) emphasized the dynamic power of online dictionaries for enhancing learning and retention of meaningful verbal material. The study showed that online dictionaries which cater for specific needs of EFL/ESL learners generate better language teaching and learning process.

Based on the efficiency of computer-assisted language learning, McAlpine and Johanne (2003) proposed an online dictionary with typical phraseology for each word, and the words and expressions in the headword list are hyperlinked to topic words and English synonyms so that, by using the search system, the ESL writers can choose phraseology appropriate to a target context, without the constraint of space and linear organization. The online dictionary solved the special problems posed by culture- and domain-specific words, inflected forms and discourse markers in reading and writing. In Chun and Payne (2004)'s study, it has been proved that learners can make good use of types of resources in online dictionaries to maximize comprehension in their own ways and benefit more from this kind of multimedia presentation of information.

The main online dictionaries include: Oxford English dictionary (http://www.oed.com), with 60,000 thousand words, 750 thousand lexical items, and 2400 thousand examples; both translating ones like the Collins On-Line Dictionaries from Harper/Collins and monolingual ones like Softkey's American Heritage Dictionary from Softkey, the Longman Dictionary. Many dictionaries incorporate some grammar help, and some, like the Longman Multimedia Dictionary, have sound and video clips to help learners recognize a word when it's spoken and put it into context.

Still, there are other online dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster online, (www.m-w.com), Longman Web Dictionary for ESL/EFL students includes usage examples, related words, and pronunciation (www.longmanwebdict.com) and some multilingual dictionaries, specialized dictionaries, translators, and more on dictionary.reference.com. The web yourDictionary.com may offer the list of 2500 online dictionaries, dealing with more than 300 languages according a survey in 2004.

It is a new language tool for English teaching and learning. With proper instruction in a context of CALL, learners can choose relevant online dictionaries according to the reading materials and exploit their reading strategies by engaging themselves in the abundant resources in the dictionaries. Students benefit from teaching reading strategies and reading comprehension in a technology-enhanced learning environment (Dreyer & Charl, 2003; Rizo-Rodriguez, 2009).

POSSIBLE APPLICATIONS OF ONLINE DICTIONARIES IN ENGLISH READING

Teachers may ask students to finish reading assignment by using certain online dictionaries through sufficient guidance. And the assignments can be various: reading comprehension, translation, summary of the passage, paraphrase of sentences, etc. for testing students' reading ability. This will help students to form good habit of autonomous learning, and the students will be provided more learning materials than those from textbooks. Teachers may analyze learners' dictionary work and figure out their difficulties in learning, which is another basis for teacher-student interaction in language teaching. This kind of teaching method can be integrated to the reading curriculum.

Learners also can use online dictionaries to check the meanings of new words, and then copy them along with their meanings and some usage notes (sentence examples, collocations, pragmatic information, etc.), save them in a Microsoft Word document for review later. It is a good way to enlarge their vocabulary for better reading comprehension.

As for the specific task design for classroom use, there are several points that should be emphasized to arouse the attention of the designers, especially teachers planning classroom activities with the aid of computer. "CALL design is a balancing act between pedagogy and technology " (Colpaert, 2002). Teachers should focus on activities not on the software and technology should not drive the class. Technology or software is just an aid for achieving learning purpose.

Meanwhile, in language teaching, the amount of optimized language input should be emphasized on one hand, and an optimized environment for language output should be provided in classroom practice for language learners on the other

hand. Teachers first provide sufficient learning materials and proper instruction when carrying out activities, and learners should be given sufficient feedback from teachers or peers to test if the learning goal is achieved.

Chapelle (2001) mentioned that designing tasks for learners in a CALL context must meet the criteria for CALL task appropriateness. The task purpose of applying online dictionaries is to facilitate learners reading comprehension. Just as mentioned above, online dictionaries provide adequate resources to support the use of CALL activity (practicality of CALL task) and the activities should be designed for promoting focus on form in language learning (language learning potential), which are the two basic criteria for CALL task. In addition, learner characteristics such as willingness to communicate, learning style and proficiency level should be taken into consideration for planning activities. The task should be aimed at meaning focus: "the learners' primary attention is directed toward the meaning of the language that is required to accomplish the task" (Chapelle 2001: 56), and the task itself should be relevant to learners' language use beyond the classroom.

The following task is designed taking the criteria into consideration. It is an example of using online dictionaries in enhancing reading comprehension. The content involved in the task is the vocabulary acquisition, since vocabulary is the main hindrance for reading comprehension for most college students and how to grasp the required words for practical use remains a puzzle for them. The task provides a solution to the problem and shows the practical application of online dictionaries in enhancing reading comprehension.

Content objective: teach students how to find useful resources in online dictionaries for grasping the proper usage of words that easily cause confusion in learning; build up appreciation on computer-assisted language learning and negotiation with peers and teachers to improve learning.

b: this task seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of online dictionaries. The task will enhance students' ability to expand their knowledge of the target language by looking up words used in certain context, make proper inference from the information, get good comprehension of the explanation, learn vocabulary and usage through analyzing available resources.

Teacher preparation:

Introduce two widely used online dictionaries. Make students familiarize the main functions of the two dictionaries.

Divide students into two groups, and give students four words that have similar meaning or usage to each group.

a. retain, maintain, endure, survive.
b. progress, proceed, promote, propose.

Give instruction for assignment to the students for classroom activity.

Steps for the students:

Learn how to efficiently use the information in online dictionaries.

Understand the English explanation of each word, find out the main usages of each word and summarize the main differences between words.

Illustrate the differences of the words with examples.

Compare the difference summary with partners.

Pair work: a summary saved in Word document of how to distinguish the words through peer discussion.

Present their assignment in teacher's email box in due time.

When students begin their work, the teacher should keep an eye on what students are doing in front of the computer in order to guarantee students' attention on their task. Meanwhile, the teacher can offer help when students have difficulty in accomplishing the task. When the class is over, the teacher collects the assignment and analyzes the language produced by the students to see if the students get the proper information from the online dictionaries.

The teacher selects the learning points of the two groups of words and two representatives from the two groups of students can use them as guidance for the word usage presentation next lesson.

From the task, students learn to search useful information in different online dictionaries efficiently and benefit from pair work. English explanation challenges students' ability to understand words in the context, thus facilitating their reading comprehension by individual and pair work, and resulting in grasping the word usage in a short time with a longer retention. Most importantly, teachers may use the students' language product as research materials to improve their teaching. From the previous students' task assignments, teachers may look at what kind of information students are searching for besides the word usage, for the sake of finding out individual variety in the resources available and learning styles used when a computer component is integrated into the classroom (Beatty, 2005); a comparison can be made between the products produced by individual work and pair work, with an aim to find out the effects of negotiation on students' output. And also, teachers may explore the advantages and disadvantages of computer-assisted language learning through this specific task.

CONCLUSION

According to Davies (2005), "the main advantage of multimedia packages is that they enable reading, writing, speaking and listening to be combined in a single activity, with the learner exercising a high degree of control over the path that he/she follows through the learning materials." The online dictionary as a new electronic product based on multimedia technology has opened up a new range of tasks for English learners. Computer-learner interaction in online dictionary work combines learning and practice, so it is a practical approach in facilitating reading comprehension. Learners may take the opportunity to improve their learning ability besides improving reading comprehension. While teachers may take the opportunity to carry out classroom research in daily tasks to explore more methods for making full use of resources in online dictionaries.

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