

Lorna Morris

A pocket electronic bilingualised school dictionary for primary learners in South Africa



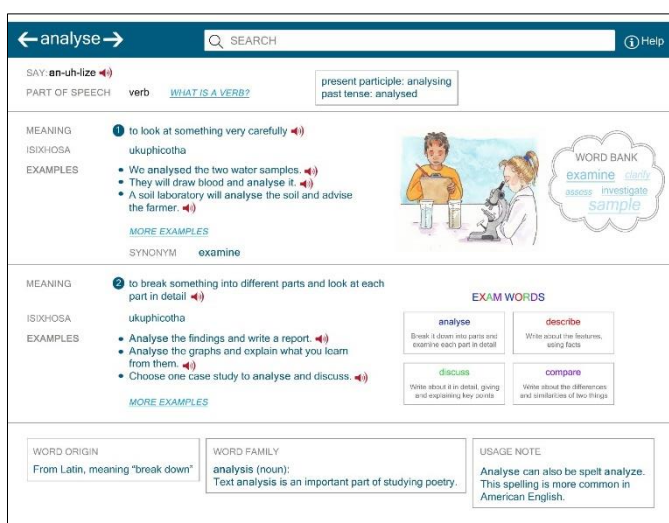
A. S. Hornby Educational Trust

Dr Lorna Morris, based in Cape Town, South Africa, created and trialled a bilingualised illustrated dictionary on handheld digital devices for primary school learners who are studying in English as an additional language.

Why? Less than 10% of the population in South Africa has English as a first language, yet from age nine, English is the language used in 80% of schools. Lorna was very aware that literacy rates in South African primary schools are shockingly low, a situation hampered for many children by lack of fluency in English. Many schools are also over-crowded and under-resourced.

What? To help fill this resource gap, Lorna proposed that portable electronic dictionaries (PEDs) would work well in the South African context. They don't require an internet connection, which can be patchy in many areas, but still provide the interactivity and features of a digital format.

How? Building on her PhD research, Lorna created a set of 27 pilot entries which included translations into three local languages, isiXhosa, isiZulu and Afrikaans, simple paraphrases, examples, and illustrations for each sense, as well as audio and other features. She loaded these onto basic tablets, a simple stand-in for the PEDs she envisaged for the final product.



She visited primary schools across three provinces and took the tablets along to trial with classes of 9-11-year-olds. In each class, she introduced the dictionary project and gave out the tablets for students to explore. Helped by the class teacher and a research assistant, she monitored and noted the students' reactions. She then interviewed a focus group of 8 children from each class and, where possible, also followed up with teacher interviews.

Feedback: The feedback from both students and teachers was overwhelmingly positive. The students were especially engaged by the interactivity of the devices, they loved the audio and the pictures. They also gave useful feedback about the size of the devices, and several said they'd like audio for the local language equivalents as well as the English. The teachers were also impressed, one commenting:

I am as blown away as my learners. Seeing on a daily basis how they battle with language usage and the cons of the traditional dictionary, I absolutely will endorse this and will recommend it as a valuable addition to a list of must-haves in the school's purchase list.

Future plans: The feedback collected from this study has provided Lorna with lots of ideas for developing the concept further. She has already made contact with a number of educational organisations who have expressed an interest in her work, and she hopes these may provide avenues to create a full-scale dictionary in future and to get it into the hands of primary school learners.

Summary by Julie Moore on behalf of the ASHDRA panel