

Dai Lingzhen

Improving the dictionary skills of teacher trainees



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Dai Lingzhen, a lecturer at a teacher training university in Southeast China, took an action research approach to investigating and trying to improve the dictionary knowledge and skills of teacher trainees as part of an English translation course she teaches.

Why? Through her own teaching experience and from responses to a preliminary pre-project questionnaire, she was aware that most of her students had no formal dictionary training and little knowledge about the reference sources they were using or how to use them effectively.

How? She conducted a two-year research project that involved incorporating explicit dictionary training tutorials into an undergraduate translation course. She used simple reflective questions and a think-aloud approach to guide students' dictionary use and foster metacognitive awareness. She administered questionnaires at the start of the course to find out about students' existing dictionary habits, students completed practical translation tasks using dictionaries, and both herself and the students kept reflective journals. At the end of the first cycle of teaching, she looked back on what had worked well and what could be improved ahead of repeating the training with the next class of students.

Results and reactions: The reactions to the dictionary training were broadly positive from both groups. Students became more aware of the resources they were using, especially in a context where online resources are of variable quality. They took more note of the source of information and started to explore a wider range of dictionaries. They also started to rely less on quick Chinese translations (which weren't always correct in context) and began to understand the benefits of thinking more carefully about part of speech and checking they had the right meaning by looking at example sentences. And crucially, their translations improved!

In the second cycle, there was more emphasis on the students exploring and comparing dictionary resources for themselves, rather than presenting them 'lecture style'. She noted that this cohort started to evaluate whether tools were suitable for specific tasks, demonstrating a deepening of their dictionary learning.

The emergence of AI: Students in the first cycle raised the question of whether AI translation tools, then just emerging, could replace dictionaries, a topic that Dai Lingzhen addressed head-on at the start of the second cycle, getting students to compare the types of information they got from different tools. They discussed how quick, but rather mechanical, vocabulary accumulation through translation tools means that as language learners, they can miss out on the crucial exploration of cultural meaning and how words are actually used.

Dictionary instruction, by guiding students to decode information from definitions, examples, collocations, usage notes, etc., fosters rigorous linguistic thinking and helps students to have a deeper understanding of vocabulary. In this process, it also cultivates students' capacity for autonomous learning

Conclusions: During the project, Dai Lingzhen not only saw the benefits of dictionary skills training for this group, through the positive feedback from students and their improved translations, but she was also able to refine her approach, making it more of a hands-on exploration and incorporating discussion of AI tools alongside traditional dictionary resources. She believes that going forward, AI tools and dictionaries can complement each other in the language teaching sphere and that by equipping trainee teachers with the skills to understand and use these resources effectively, they will be able to pass their skills onto their future language students.