

COMMON ERRORS IN THE USE OF ENGLISH DICTIONARY TRANSLATIONS BY BEGINNING LEVEL LEARNERS IN JAPAN

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This paper describes errors commonly produced by beginning level EFL learners when they use dictionaries to look for English words and expressions for use in productive writing and speaking tasks. Common kinds of errors are examined to see whether they are caused by the students' failure to use a dictionary at all, or by the way they select from among the definitions or translations listed in the dictionary. Ways to train students to be better dictionary users are suggested.

I. Background

1. Dictionary use research

For EFL learners bilingual dictionaries are an all-important source of target language words and information about their use, and being able to use one well is an essential skill for any English learner. The successful application of dictionary related strategies has, however, often been considered to be something that students can acquire without special instruction (Legessa-Reda, 2011:6), yet studies have shown that students do not always use their dictionaries well for productive purposes (Nesi & Meara, 1994; Legessa-Reda, 2011). In spite of this, and even though learner variables such as L1 backgrounds, language proficiency levels, cognitive skills and learning styles all affect students' ability to use a dictionary effectively, dictionary use skills have not been properly studied until recently (Tono, 2001:36), and most of the research that has been done has involved advanced level learners (Nation, 2001:283) rather than the beginning level ones that are the target of this study.

From the late 1980s, however, there was an increased awareness of the important role dictionaries play in the productive use of English rather than just in reading, and the need for teachers to take up dictionary use in class was recognized (Nation, 2001; Tono, 2001). Other research also supports this claim. Legessa-Reda (2011:65) found that the students in his sample of high school students did not use a dictionary to check the spelling of words or their correct inflected or derived forms in their written work, while Nesi & Meara (1994:14) noted that the

students in their sample in some cases made errors because they used only a part of a dictionary definition without really understanding how it related to the word they were looking up.

A recent study of particular relevance to this one is that of Legessa-Reda (2011) who examined, as part of a more comprehensive study, how often and how well a sample of high school students used dictionaries for productive purposes, mainly writing. He concludes that the majority of students did not employ dictionaries adequately because they did not seem to recognize the value of the information in them and also perhaps because they have not often been required to write carefully, using their dictionary to check spelling, inflection/derivation and pronunciation, or to check grammar and collocation. For productive tasks they tended to focus on meaning and did not make use of the information given to find correct or appropriate forms of new or partly known words for use in productive work. He suggests the teacher can and should provide guidance on how to find out about spelling, inflected/derived forms, pronunciation, grammar, collocation, constraints on the use of words, synonyms, opposites etc.

In his comprehensive study of dictionary use in the context of foreign language learning Tono (2001:167) points out that at least with English-Japanese dictionaries, students tend to choose the translation that appears as the first sub-entry and ignore definitions and examples in subsequent sub-entries unless there is an obvious reason why the first translation is probably not the correct one. He also notes that if there is a long list of examples under the first definition, students often do not go on to the next definition if there is one. This raises the question of whether the students know what to look for among all the information provided under any one listing.

Nation's (1990:41) discussion of what it means to know a word is relevant to any consideration of dictionary use. He emphasizes the fact that in foreign language learning it is important to understand how the foreign language divides up meaning in a different way from the mother tongue. A word which illustrates this problem, and which learners of English in Japan meet with quite early in their studies, is *asobu*, most commonly translated as *play* by Japanese learners. There will be few teachers of English in Japan who have not seen sentences such as, 'I went to play with my friends on the weekend'. This is acceptable if the learner is an elementary school student, but university students, *go out with* or *enjoy themselves with their friends*. And yet Japanese students rarely check for alternative translations of *asobu* and so do not learn that *play* is not always appropriate because the meanings of *play* and *asobu* do not overlap exactly.

A related issue is that different languages use different ways of combining words to create meaning and this may be reflected in the way words are assigned to part of speech categories, an example of this being the way many English

adjectives are expressed by nouns or verbs in Japanese (Swan, 1997:159). Most teachers of beginning level learners will be aware that their students are not sufficiently familiar with the parts of speech in English and the ways in which they do or do not relate to the organization of categories in Japanese. As a result, information about parts of speech given in a dictionary is largely ignored by them. In fact, in some commonly used Japanese-English dictionaries this information is supplemented by more prolific examples, which, however, can still cause confusion. Among beginning level learners in particular, grammatical patterns and collocations become a problem when dictionary users want to produce a sentence because they have difficulties deciding how a word collocates with other words, especially when it occurs in a grammatical pattern which is dissimilar to its translation in the students' mother tongue (Nation, 1990:41).

Tono's (2001) conclusions to a study investigating some characteristics of good dictionary users using Japanese university students as a sample, takes up the points made above. He argues that it seems necessary to distinguish between skills necessary for getting information from the macrostructure and those relating to the microstructure. He found that many users miss the detailed information given in the microstructure and argues that students need to be taught how to make use of it. He recommends that students should be trained to become familiar with basic dictionary use conventions, proposing the implementation of proper training syllabuses and dictionary skills assessment tests, although he admits the need for more research in the hope that 'with proper dictionary skills training, together with more opportunities to use dictionaries in real life situations, less successful dictionary users can develop into skillful users' (p.114).

2. Purpose

This paper is not primarily an empirical study, nor is it a critique of the translations listed in dictionaries. The writer is already aware that in their written work students have problems with all the issues described in the research cited above and frequently make orthographic, semantic, syntactic, grammatical and morphological errors, many of which could have been avoided if they were more skilful at using their dictionaries, which, for the most part, contain the necessary information, so it is not the aim here to find out how often these kinds of mistakes are made by a particular sample of students. Rather, this is an exploratory study which attempts to categorize and give examples of some of the most common kinds of errors beginning level learners make in writing and speaking and try to draw some conclusions as to what extent these may be caused by the students' relatively low level of English, and their inability to make use of the information presented in the dictionary. Ways teachers can include dictionary use exercises into class work in order to help students learn to use their dictionaries to find the

information they need and to avoid errors as they progress through their class work will be suggested based on the conclusions drawn.

II. Method

1. Data collection

For the purposes of the study a short dictionary User Profile Questionnaire and a Dictionary Use Quiz were administered to a class of five first year students in the School of Information Studies at Shizuoka Sangyo University with low beginning, or false beginner level ability in English in order to confirm what was already known by the writer about students' dictionary use habits and their propensity to make certain kinds of errors. The open-ended User Profile Questionnaire, based on one used by Tono (2001), asked questions about the students' dictionary use history and habits and the results are noted where they are considered to be informative. Data obtained from both the Dictionary Use Quiz and the researcher's files were also used to illustrate common productive errors and possible relationships between them and students' ability to use dictionaries effectively. Data from the researcher's files are in the form of short typed up lists of corrections to errors found in the written work of students in an intermediate level English class in the School of Information Studies at Shizuoka Sangyo University. These lists were used in the relevant class for reviewing commonly made errors for the benefit of all the students in the class. Lists made over a period of one year indicate that the frequently recurring errors are of certain types and could be organized into a set of worksheets to teach students how to avoid commonly occurring error types by more careful checking in their dictionaries.

The design of the Dictionary Use Quiz proved difficult because it was not possible to make large demands on the students on account of their low level of ability in English. For example, it was considered unreasonable and unproductive to ask beginning level students to translate a complete sentence from Japanese into English or to use a specified word in a complete English sentence of their own composition. A compromise was made by writing out a sentence in Japanese and a translation of the same sentence into English with a space into which students had to insert an appropriate translation of just the highlighted target word. For example, the first item in the quiz was formulated like this:

夏休みに高校の同級生とよく遊ぶ。

In the summer vacation I often with my high school class mates.

Here students were required to write a suitable translation for 遊ぶ (*asobu*) in the Japanese version in the highlighted space in the English version. The students in the sample were given the choice of using their dictionary to check the translation

before filling in the blank, or, if they were confident they knew a correct translation, writing it in without checking their dictionary. If they did not use their dictionary for any item they were requested to mark that item with a cross (×).

This method of data collection was used primarily to double check data already in the writer's files to see how frequently the sample group also made the same or similar errors even when they used a dictionary. The previously accumulated data was considered an important source of information because it involved spontaneously generated errors, rather than ones made by the sample students who filled in the Quiz, but who may have been adversely influenced in some way by its design.

III Results

The Dictionary User Profile Questionnaire asked questions about previous training in using a Japanese-English or English-Japanese Dictionary, degree of confidence in using a dictionary, frequency of dictionary use, and the name of the dictionary used. The results of this Questionnaire indicated that only two students had any training in dictionary use and only one student used a dictionary with a feeling of confidence although all had been using one for seven or more years. Taishukan *GENIUS Japanese-English Dictionary* was used by two students to complete the Quiz. The other three students used other Japanese-English Dictionaries.

The items in the Dictionary Use Quiz and the responses of the five students in the sample are given in Table 1. When listing up the data below each student was assigned a number from 1 to 5, so that, for example, all the responses marked 1 are from the same student.

夏休みに高校の同級生とよく遊ぶ。

In the summer vacation I often [] with my high school classmates.

1) have a good time 2) Play 3) play × 4) play× 5) play

私はよく大学の友達のアパートに遊びに行きます。

I often go to [] at my university friend's apartment.

1) visit 2) come and see 3) enjoy 4) play 5) see

デパートで買い物をしました。スーパーで買い物するのは嫌いです。

I did some shopping at a []. I don't like shopping at a [].

1) department store, supermarket 2) department store, supermarket 3) department store, supermarket 4) department store, spermarket× 5) department store, supermarket

恵美はとてもスタイルがいいです。甘いものは食べないからです。

Emi is very []. Because she doesn't eat sweet things.

1) has a good figure 2) good style 3) figure 4) slim 5) good figure

あの先生の授業はつまらないです。

That teacher's classes are _____.

- 1) not interesting× 2) boring 3) boring 4) bored 5) trifling

することがないから退屈です。

I don't have anything to do, so I'm _____.

- 1) bored 2) boring 3) doring 4) boring

最近はいい教師を見つけるのが難しいです。

_____ it's hard to find a good teacher.

- 1) Recently 2) lately 3) recently 4) Recently 5) The latest

近ごろの天気は変です。

_____ the weather has been strange.

- 1) Nowadays 2) recently 3) lately 4) Nowadays 5) The present day

このお店は閉店しました。

This shop _____.

- 1) to close 2) closede 3) close up 4) has closed down 5) closed

この喫茶店は午前8時に開店します。

This coffee shop _____ at 8:00 A.M.

- 1) closing time 2) close 3) opening time 4) cloused 5) open a shop

イタリアへ行ったらローマをみたいです。

When I go to _____ I want to see _____.

- 1) Italy, Rome× 2) Italy, Rome 3) Italy, Rome 4) Italia, Rome× 5) Italy, Rome

今日は曇っています。

Today it is _____.

- 1) cloudying 2) cloudy 3) cloudy 4) cloudy× 5) cloudy

日本人の女性はよく友人にお世辞をいいます。

Japanese women often _____ compliments to their friends.

- 1) flattery 2) flatter 3) says 4) tell 5) compliment

今日はズボンをはいています。

Today I am _____ jeans.

- 1) put on 2) put on 3) wear 4) wearing× 5) in

山へ行けば癒される。

When I go to the mountains I _____.

- 1) feel comforted and at peace 2) peaceful 3) heal 4) am mended 5) heal

このレストランはいつも混んでいるから予約を取った。

This restaurant is always crowded so I _____ a reservation.

- 1) get 2) got 3) got 4) have 5) keep

このスカートを試着したいです。

I want to _____ this skirt.

- 1) trying 2) try 3) fitting 4) try on× 5) try on

Table 1 Dictionary Use Quiz Items and Students' Translations

The errors produced by students who completed the Dictionary Use Quiz were put into three major categories for the purpose of discussion here. The students' insertions were checked in Taishukan *GENIUS Japanese-English Dictionary* (second edition, 2003-2004) (*GENIUS*), and in two instances another dictionary used by one student, to try to pinpoint reasons for errors made even when a dictionary was consulted.

Category 1 covers Japanese words whose meaning does not overlap with one single English word. For example, in this context, *asobu* and *asobi ni ikimasu* can be translated literally as *play* and *go and play* respectively. Four out of five of the students in the sample used 'play' for *asobu* as in 'In the summer vacation I often "play" with my high school classmates'. Some also used it in 'I often go to "play" at my friend's apartment', when 'visit' or 'enjoy myself' would have been more appropriate. Others inserted 'come and see', 'enjoy' or 'see' here, all of which fail to take the presence of 'at' in 'at my friend's apartment' into account. *GENIUS* first lists 'play' for *asobu*, but indicates that it is something children do, and that for an adult 'enjoy oneself' is correct. The frequent errors for this item seem to stem from the assumption on the part of the students that *play* covers all the same meanings as *asobu*, coupled with a failure to check whether this is really the case by reading through all the translations under the entry for *asobu* or checking under *asobi* where 'come and see me' and 'come over' are listed.

Haite imasu is another example of a meaning which is not covered by one word in English, as it can be translated as both *put on* and *wear*. In the Quiz, students produced erroneous sentences such as 'Today I am put on jeans', perhaps in a half-realized attempt to use the present continuous, but with the wrong verb. The first translation for *haku* in *GENIUS* is 'put on' accompanied by an explanation that it is normally used to cover the action of putting on an item of clothing. The next translation is 'wear' to describe a state. In the Quiz, two students inserted 'put on', perhaps choosing the first definition in their dictionary without checking the examples. or inflecting the verb. Of those students who did choose the correct translation, one used 'wear' another 'wearing' rather than the correct 'am wearing'.

Category 2 includes loan words which are used in an abbreviated form or with a different meaning to the original, usually, English word or expression. It has been suggested that English loanwords in Japanese can help with the learning of related English words (Nation, 1990; Nation, 2001), but experience in the classroom shows that the way the English loan words are changed into the Japanese sound system and sometimes shift in meaning can also be a cause of spelling and semantic errors. The items in the Quiz designed to test this were *depaato*, an

abbreviated form of 'department store', and *supaa*, an abbreviated form of 'supermarket'. No students made errors in these items, except for one spelling error, even when they did not use their dictionaries. A dictionary search for these items quickly produced the correct English, although it is not unusual to find *depaato* or *depart* used in written work, indicating students are sometimes not aware of the dangers inherent in using loanword in their Japanese versions in English and fail to check them.

A more difficult loanword is *sutairu* which comes from *style* in English and is seen most frequently in the expression *sutairu ga ii* which means *has a good figure* or *is slim* rather than *is stylish*. The Quiz item required students to enter *slim* rather than *has a good figure* because the English sentence requires an adjective. In fact, *GENIUS* does not list the translation 'She is slim' as an option under *sutairu*, although one student did use 'slim'. Others copied 'has a good figure' from their dictionaries without taking the 'is' into account and looking for an appropriate adjective.

Also included in this category are proper nouns such *Italia* and *Roma* which are place names rendered into Japanese phonetically from the original Italian rather than English, and so cannot be used in English simply by alphabetizing them. All but one of the students entered these translations with the help of the dictionary. There was one instance of 'Italia', entered by the student who did not check the dictionary.

Category 3 includes words which require an understanding of collocations, verb inflections and other grammatical patterns associated with them for their correct use. This was the category expected to cause the students the most problems both because of their poor English ability and poor dictionary use skills.

Tsumaranai and *taikutsu* can be translated by the adjectives *boring* and *bored* respectively and in the Quiz such sentences as 'That teacher's classes are bored', and 'I don't have anything to do, so I'm boring' were found in a number of cases. One student completed these sentences to read 'That teacher's classes are trifling' and 'I don't have anything to do, so I'm tedium' as listed first in *The New Crown Japanese-English Dictionary, Sixth Edition (1995)*, which was used by one student. These items incorporate both lexical and grammatical errors. For *tsumaranai*, *GENIUS* lists 'dull' first and 'boring' second and either translation is appropriate. An example given for 'boring' is 'a boring book', nevertheless one student inserted 'bored' for this item. Finding a translation for *taikutsu* in *GENIUS* required reading through several entries to get past 'boring' and find the example 'I was bored', which may or may not have appeared to be the required translation. Only one student inserted 'bored', while four inserted 'boring' and one 'tedium'.

Saikin and *konogoro* can be translated into English as *recently* or *lately* and *these days* or *nowadays*, respectively, but *recently* is used with the simple past or

present perfect tense in English, while *these days* and *nowadays* should not, as in 'Recently I have been busy' compared with 'These days I am busy'. Examples of errors in this item are 'Recently it is hard to find a good teacher' and 'Nowadays the weather has been strange'. *GENIUS* gives 'She was in Kyoto until recently' as an example of the use of 'recently', but also lists 'Have you seen him lately'. However, it also gives *konogoro* as an alternative for *saikin* and under *konogoro*, 'Nowadays everything is more expensive' appears, which should have indicated it was a suitable choice for use in '_____ it's hard to find a good teacher.' One student entered 'the latest', which is the first listing in *CROWN*. There were no correct entries for '_____ it's hard to find a good teacher', while there were two ('recently' and 'lately') for '_____ the weather has been strange'. The confusion here is apparent.

Heiten and *kaiten* are nouns commonly used with the verb *suru*, but in the examples in the Quiz, *heiten shimashita* is in the past tense and is best translated by *has closed*, that is, a verb in the present perfect, although *is closed* is also correct, while *kaiten shimasu* requires *suru* to be in the present tense to give the meaning of 'This shop opens at 8:00 a.m.' 'This shop is open at 8:00 a.m.' would also have been correct here. There was only one acceptable answer to the item using *heiten*, although it was a slight variation on the expected response—'This shop has closed down'. In *GENIUS* 'closed', with 'We're closed' as an example, was listed several translations down and few students found it. There were no correct translations for 'This coffee shop will be _____ at 8:00 a.m., although *GENIUS* gives 'The shop will be open from nine o'clock' as an example sentence.

Kumotte imasu is an inflected form of the verb *kumoru* (*to be cloudy*) and indicates a state. In English this meaning is best expressed by be+adjective so a correct sentence would be 'Today it is cloudy'. There was one erroneous answer to this item—'Today it is cloudying', in spite of the fact that the student used his dictionary. *GENIUS* gives 'become [get] cloudy' as an example but not 'is cloudy'.

Yoyaku wo toru is a collocation in which the verb required in English (*make* or *get*) is not a direct translation of the one required in Japanese. *GENIUS* lists 'reserve' first but other students used 'get' which is listed further down. Perhaps the collocation *make/get a reservation* seemed easier to use than 'reserve' in this case.

Shichaku shita is another example of a noun used with *suru*, which however, has been inflected to become *shitai* to give the meaning of *want to*. The required translation *try on* can be found quite readily in *GENIUS* if students look past the first entry which is 'fitting', but some students used 'fitting' while others inserted 'trying' or 'try'.

Iyasareru and *oseji wo iimasu*, were picked out from written assignments of slightly more advanced level students and serve as examples of some of the more

difficult issues foreign language learner face with grammar and collocations when using a dictionary. The verb *iyasareu* is the passive form of *iyasu* which can be translated variously as *relieve*, *cure*, *shake off*, *soothe*, among other translations. The student who used this in a written assignment knew or had checked that *soothe* was a possible translation for *iyasu*, but was not aware of the need to use the passive tense and so had written '... I soothe'. A dictionary will not provide a translation that will fit this item in the Quiz.

The collocation *oseji wo iimasu* translates literally as *say pleasing words*, and one student inserted 'says' and another 'tells', directly translating the Japanese. In spite of the fact that the first entry in *GENIUS* is 'compliment' with an example using 'pay her a compliment', two students inserted 'flatter' or 'flattery', perhaps because, although this is the second definition, it lists 'oseiji wo iu koto' and so matches the quiz item more closely but less helpfully.

IV Discussion

The errors found in the class work of students, which were also found in the Quiz, indicate problems of two major kinds. The first is that students do not realize that they must use their dictionaries more carefully and consistently if they are to produce accurate written work and find appropriate words and expressions for use in spoken English. They need to be encouraged not to translate directly from Japanese, and not to assume they know the correct translation instead of checking for it. The frequent erroneous uses of 'play' is a typical example of this issue. Students also need to learn to take care when they bring loanwords back into English. Failure to check that they have got the spelling and meaning correct is a common source of error. Special care must be taken with proper nouns and place names not to simply spell out the katakana version using the alphabet for use in English.

Nesi & Meara (1994:11) found in their research that many usage errors were due to their subjects' lack of understanding of the rules of English grammar and that semantic errors also resulted from the students' inability to choose the correct word class. This proved true for the students in the sample, and the problem was aggravated by the students' failure to read through all the translations and example sentences, but instead to choose the first one listed. The students' awareness that they do not really know how to use their dictionaries, and that their grasp of English is poor, perhaps encouraged them to choose the first translation they found because they knew they could not make a considered choice from among all the translations listed.

The items in the Quiz were designed without reference to a dictionary, so as not to make the finding of appropriate translations too simple a matter. This

may have made the students' task unnecessarily difficult, but did draw attention to the fact that the students were in many cases unable to rely on an understanding of the grammar of English to help them make a choice of translation. The need to fill in a space in an extant sentence may also have forced them to deal with an unfamiliar translation of the Japanese; that is to say, one they did recognize readily. Another problem which became apparent was that, as already noted, students did not always read through all the translations to find the best fit even though one was almost always to be found if a careful and informed search was made. Nor were they aware that it is not a simple matching of translations that is required, since the semantic coverage of a word in Japanese may not be the same as it is in English.

The problems with dictionary usage outlined in this preliminary study of common errors in the productive use of English EFL dictionary definitions made by beginning level learners in Japan are ones that should be worked on in the classes of learners and this study was done in preparation for designing exercises for teaching dictionary skills for use with such learners. The obvious lack of understanding of what points need be taken into consideration when choosing a translation from a dictionary suggests that a dictionary search exercise could be appended to each lesson using examples taken from the new grammatical usages and vocabulary introduced in that lesson before the students work on them. For example, the first few lessons of a false beginners textbook typically introduce the words for occupations and place names and nationalities many of which are loan words, so at the beginning of the lesson, they could be asked to complete a quick quiz requiring them to write out the correct English for words like *enjinia* (engineer), *supeinjin*, (Spaniard), *ousutoraria* (Australia), *(E)meeru* (e-mail), first without using their dictionaries and then by checking each item for accuracy. In a lesson covering ways to describe the weather and the clothes worn in different seasons, students could first be asked to write translations of the relevant Japanese sentences and words, and then check them in the dictionary. By doing this they would be forced to look more closely at English usages such as *be* + adjective or the present continuous to describe weather conditions, and loanwords for items of clothing such as *gloves*, rendered into Japanese as *guroobu*. In a more advanced lesson dealing with the past perfect students could be asked to write or translate sentences using the past perfect with *saikin* and *konogoro*, so that they become aware of the need to take the grammatical and morphological features of a word into account when looking for information for productive purposes in a dictionary. Custom designed items to cover such expressions as *iyasareru* and *oseji wo iu* could be introduced in each lesson accompanied by guided instruction in finding suitable translations in the dictionary and the issues involved with unlisted translations such as *iyasareru*.

Legessa-Reda's (2011:59) claim that students are not used to writing carefully and accurately using their dictionary to the full suggests another useful form of practice might be to include purpose written English sentences or paragraphs in classroom work which contain some of the errors common to beginning level learners and have students to check them to identify the errors. This would serve to make students aware that the translations and collocations they thought they knew based on usage of the items in Japanese might in fact be erroneous.

The purpose of this study was to examine the kinds of errors beginning level students in the writer's own class make in preparation for designing and editing a dictionary workbook for use in class to help students master dictionary use skills as they study English. It has provided many useful ideas for this project and the researcher plans to apply them to make teaching materials which will help students work on issues outlined here in class time.

V. Conclusion

Dictionary use skills are a matter of concern for both students and teachers yet are an issue which has not been fully researched and which textbooks rarely take up, in fact cannot take up if they are designed for users with a variety of language backgrounds. The present study identifies some of the problems beginning level English learners in Japan have in using their dictionaries. This kind of research should be useful to teachers of English who have some knowledge of Japanese and teach to students at any level, but focuses on beginning level students as they have particular difficulty finding appropriate translations in their dictionaries because of their poor knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical patterns. Dictionary use exercises which could benefit Japanese learners of English could be usefully written up into individual lessons which could be appended to the work introduced in the textbook or other teaching material as required.

This study is still in the preliminary stages and its limitations must be acknowledged, in particular the small amount of data used and the method of sourcing it. Further data, derived from students' work so that it covers spontaneously generated errors, will, it is hoped, provide material for use in writing a set of well-designed worksheets for use in instructing students on how to use their dictionaries in ways that tie in with their English ability and classroom work.

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