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DICTIONARY SKILLS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AND GERMAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN HUNGARY

A questionnaire study

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Research into dictionary use has increased significantly in the recent past (e. g., Kosem et al. 2018; Lew/De Schryver 2014; Müller-Spitzer (ed.) 2014; Nesi 2012), yet Hungary seems to fall behind as there is a scarcity of research on dictionary use despite its necessity in the learning process (e. g., Dringó-Horváth 2017; Gaál 2017; P. Márkus 2020).

A dictionary comprises essential information offered to language learners, however, interpreting all the information obtained is not an easy task. Learners need special skills to succeed and if the challenges are high, but the skills are low, users may lose confidence in dictionaries. It looks as though the skills of dictionary users have been taken for granted. Nevertheless, nobody is born with the skills and knowledge needed to use a dictionary effectively. Students must learn how to communicate with their dictionaries to solve language-related problems as they support autonomous learning. The dictionary is widely regarded as a ‘teacher who cannot talk’ (Chi 1998). Teachers are not available continuously, so students need to develop the competences required to achieve independent and autonomous learning.

Results of previous studies point out that in Hungary ‘dictionary awareness’ is generally rather low (e. g., Dringó-Horváth 2017; P. Márkus 2020), and that more attention to the teaching of dictionary skills would be needed in the curricula for English language learning. The enormous challenges presented by the poor dictionary culture and the inability of teachers to integrate dictionary pedagogy into everyday teaching are clearly visible. With the aim of developing a method to improve the existing situation, the authors examined the dictionary-using behaviour of graduates in English and German Language as well as their attitudes towards teaching and learning dictionary skills in the classroom. The quantitative research aimed to investigate the participants’ (N=197) preferences and attitudes regarding dictionary use, their dictionary consultation behaviour, and the role of dictionaries as an aid to language learning. The results of the research seem to confirm some trends revealed in previous studies (e. g., Dringó-Horváth 2017; Gaál 2017; Nied Curcio 2015; Kosem et al. 2018; Töpel 2015): a strong increase in the use of digital, especially online dictionaries; the preference of free online dictionaries over paid ones without being aware of the quality differences between the two; the frequent use of translation programs and search engines for dictionary purposes; and the low prestige of teaching dictionary use (dictionary skills are typically acquired in an autonomous, self-taught way). The results may also suggest that the participants do not or only superficially use the aids related to dictionaries, and that dictionaries are not used in sufficient quantity consciously. Based on previous research and observations of dictionary use “it is a truth universally acknowledged in lexicographic circles that user’s guides are very seldom consulted” (Svensén 2009, p. 459), which hinders effective dictionary use (e. g., Atkins/Varantola 1997).

The authors were also curious how teaching of dictionary use is reflected in the educational practice of the participants with teaching experience. Unfortunately, it seems that dictionary didactics is not necessarily an essential part of foreign language lessons. However, different types of dictionaries and search techniques are to a certain extent part of teaching dictionary use. The answers indicate that teaching dictionary skills would be most facilitated by educational aids related to the topic and that the central educational policy should support a better presentation of the topic (cf. Lew/Galas 2008; P. Márkus 2020).

As for the electronic dictionaries, it may be concluded that participants typically do not take advantage of the new features (e.g., customization, upgradeability) and search techniques. Several other studies show a similar lack of knowledge of electronic dictionaries (Dringó-Horváth 2017; Nied Curio 2015), which indicates a great deal of uncertainty when choosing from the increasing range of dictionaries. Participants may not be aware of these new opportunities and their potential benefits, as teaching how to use electronic dictionaries lags behind the teaching of the use of traditional paper dictionaries. This seems problematic based on the results of classroom dictionary use, which shows that the use of online dictionaries is more prevalent. In addition to the lack of teaching dictionary skills, the responsibility of publishers and electronic dictionary providers also arises: Does the user interface provide sufficient description of the available functions? / Is there an adequate reference to the new functions?

Dictionary use and studying with electronic dictionaries are – despite many similarities – characterized by significant differences compared to their print counterparts. Therefore, special emphasis should be laid on the special features of electronic dictionaries: in the classroom, with the help of specific exercises instructors should demonstrate how specific features of electronic dictionaries can be used effectively (e.g., search strategies that can have a positive impact on the language learning process) (Dringó-Horváth 2021).

Based on the findings, we plan to design a core “dictionary skills module”, which could be incorporated into different courses at the university. After the completion of the project, we hope to be able to give guidance on how to integrate (the teaching of) dictionary use into traditional classroom teaching, thus making the teaching and learning process more effective; improve the digital competences of students; as well as contribute to the reduction of inequalities among students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

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