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DICTIONARIES, FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

New challenges in the digital era

Abstract In foreign language teaching the use of dictionaries, especially bilingual, has always been related to the hypotheses concerning the relationship between the native language (L1) and second language acquisition method. If the bilingual dictionary was an obvious tool in the grammar-translation method, it was banned from the classroom in the direct, audiolingual and audiovisual methods. Also in the communicative method, foreign language learners are discouraged from using a dictionary. Its use should not obstruct the goals of communicatively oriented foreign language learning – a view still held by many foreign language teachers.

Nevertheless, the reality has been different: Foreign language learners have always used dictionaries, even if they no longer possess a print dictionary and mainly use online resources and applications. Dictionaries and online resources will continue to play an important role in the future. In the Council of Europe's language policy, with its emphasis on multilingualism and lifelong learning, the adequate use of reference tools as a strategic skill is highlighted. In several European countries, educational guidelines refer to the use of dictionaries in the context of media literacy, both in mother tongue and foreign language teaching. Not only is their adequate use important, but so too is the comparison, assessment and evaluation of the information presented, in order to develop Language Awareness and Language Learning Awareness. This is good news. However, does this mean that dictionaries are actually used in class? What role do dictionaries play in foreign language teaching in schools and universities? Are foreign language learners in the digital era really competent users? And how competent are their teachers? Are they familiar with the current (online) dictionary landscape? Can they support their students? After a more in-depth study of the status quo of dictionary use by foreign language learners and teachers and the gap between their needs and the reality, this contribution discusses the challenges facing lexicographers and meta-lexicographers and what educational policy measures are necessary to make their efforts worthwhile in turning foreign language learners – and their teachers – into competent users in a multilingual and digital world.

Keywords Dictionaries; dictionary use; dictionary teaching; dictionary didactics; online resources; foreign language learner; foreign language teacher; language awareness; foreign language teaching; lifelong learning, reference tools, media literacy

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